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THE WORLD'S LEAST INTERESTING MASTER SWORDSMAN

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Chapter 1 — A Family’s Journey

Part 1 — Grown-Ups

A bit after Saiga and company set out for Tempera Village, and well before their return... Lady Douve is having tea with Tahlan in front of her manor near the royal capital; Blois and I are guarding her, and Lain is also present.

“Say, Tahlan, have you improved since apprenticing yourself to Sansui? Should I have him train you more?”

“Oh, ho, I had thought you’d prefer to have more time with me.”

“Oh, my, do I seem like such a needy woman to you? I almost find that offensive.”

“Ah, my apologies. I let my ego get the better of me.”

It’s worth noting again that Tahlan is very much an Adonis. Basically, he’s faultless in both body and soul, and while he has no claim to his country’s throne, he’s very much a prince in his own right. It was understandable that Lady Douve would be smitten with him. Or rather, if she had ever found fault with Tahlan, I’m pretty sure she’d have pretty much given up on the idea of marriage altogether.

“Well... It’s perhaps more accurate to say that I desire more time with you,” Tahlan replied.

“That makes it sound like I’m being mean to you,” Douve retorted playfully.

“Not at all. To be wrapped around a woman’s fingers is every man’s dream...”

Neither Blois nor I, not to mention Lain, had ever seen Lady Douve in such a good mood. Even if she might have been in good humor for a short while, she often lost interest and her demeanor dampened as she grew bored. For Lady Douve to always be in a good mood in front of Tahlan... Frankly, it showed just how impressive of a man Tahlan was.

“Particularly so if the fingers are as lovely as yours.”

“You seem quite practiced at holding a woman’s hand. Perhaps that’s how you seduced the women of your homeland?”

“Not at all. You are the only — the only one I’d ever say such things to.”

“Oh, please... You’re so very practiced at taking my hand. To have you feign shyness at that...”

“Oh, indeed? Then what should I make about your lack of hesitation at letting me take your hand? It would seem you’re used to that.”

“Oh dear, quibbling...maybe you intend to do more than touch? Nibbling, perhaps?”

“If that is what you wish.”

Tahlan is caressing Lady Douve’s palm. There is nothing untoward happening, but the two of them exude a definite air of sensuality. I don’t know how else to put it, but it’s a very grown-up mood.

Could Lady Douve have been hoping for this sort of exchange from me and Blois? If that's the case, that's asking for way too much. It's completely out of my wheelhouse.

"Your hand is like Sansui's... Calloused and thick..."

"Does it offend you? A warrior's touch?"

"I have no desire to be like that myself, but this is the bare minimum I expect from a man."

"Just the palm?"

"You would have a lady speak the rest aloud? I'm not fond of shy men."

"I find the prospect of your displeasure frightening. What must I do to avoid it?"

"To not know if it's not said aloud, to think you'll be told if you ask... That seems...awfully convenient."

"You have me there."

What's remarkable about Tahlan is that he doesn't seem to be bothered or to suffer when speaking to Lady Douve. While Lady Douve is enjoying putting him on the spot, he also seems to be enjoying their wordplay. I don't have the faintest clue of how you'd end up with a man like him.

Even more of a mystery is how such a lady-killer has stayed single until getting caught by Lady Douve. Lady Douve's extreme fortune in snagging a man like him is something even I, as an Immortal, can't understand. Despite not even trying to look for what she desired, he just sort of fell into her lap. Is Lady Douve, in fact, the center upon which the world turns?

"It seems I'm no match for you."

"Heh..."

It was like an act, but not an act; like a play, but not a play. They were simply holding forth without concerning themselves with an audience. It's as though they're engaging in a bit of amorous horseplay. Therefore, the natural end of this conversation will be when Tahlan finally concedes to Lady Douve.

"They're so grown-up..." Lain says, watching the scene admiringly. It seems she has no problem understanding what's going on between them, or in reading the mood of their interactions. She really is a sharp child.

"They're so grown-up..." repeats Blois. She usually doesn't speak while on duty, but even she can't help but comment.

I, at five hundred years old, simply find the interplay interesting, but it's perhaps a little too much stimulation for the young Blois and Lain.

Still, it's quite a picturesque scene. A highborn couple, smiling as they sip tea, both lit by the sun's warmth. It's an idyllic picture of elegance, of happiness. A perfect moment without fault.

As someone who has served Lady Douve since she was a child, it's as though I'm watching a spoiled younger sister bring home a perfect fiancé. Now, this is a metaphor, as there'd be no way I could handle having Lady Douve as a younger sister, but it feels like I'm an older sibling that's watched her grow up.

Whether Lady Douve's actual elder brother and father feel the same way is another question entirely.

"Ahem, Lady Douve. I hate to interrupt, but Their Lordships are heading this way."

His Brothership and His Fathership are approaching, exuding an extremely bloodthirsty aura. Considering the two of them will generally attack anyone who even is suspected of approaching Lady Douve, there's no way they'll forgive a man who's actually wooing her.

"Oh... Are their bodyguards with them?"

"No, just those two."

"Ah, then it must be about that topic."

The shouts of the two men slowly get closer. Since they're on horseback, the thunder of the hoofbeats accompanies them. As an Immortal, I can tell where people are based on their auras, but I wonder how those two were able to figure out that Lady Douve was flirting with Tahlan. It could just be that they just convinced themselves that it must be happening, or perhaps it's some sort of supernatural gut instinct.

Either way, it's an annoyance.

"Say, Tahlan. I usually have Sansui calm Father and Brother, but would you like to try it today?" Lady Douve asks idly, casually throwing out a ridiculous proposal.

"..."

It's probably not convincing from me, given that I do it all the time, but it's extremely difficult to knock out a rider on horseback without injuring them. After all, they could just fall off the running horse. They might break bones in the process or, in the worst case, even end up dying.

"Are you certain?"

"Certain? Of course... Sansui does it all the time. Show me you can do it at least once."

Even Tahlan had been caught off-guard by the request, but he answers Lady Douve's ludicrous demand with a satisfied smile.

"Don't worry, they won't complain about a broken bone or two."

"I see... My apologies for insulting the warrior house with my unnecessary concern."

Sepaeda is a well-established warrior house, which is why they might just up and attack someone they didn't like, but they also wouldn't be able to complain if they were taken down by a counterattack. I don't know if this principle shows their honor or lack of it, honestly. It may be a little late to wonder this, but how has this house lasted this long?

“Very well, then. Master Sansui, I will stop them today.”

“Very well. Be careful.”

Oddly enough, their values don’t seem to phase Tahlan in the slightest. It really is hard to gauge the people of this world.

“I’m off…!” Tahlan heads toward the two riders. His manner shows he’s both a tough young man and a giddy little boy.

“Mmm… Tahlan is certainly cute,” Lady Douve muses, staring affectionately at him as he heads off. Her gaze is admiring, and she sounds extremely happy.

Is that really okay? I mean, he’s still risking his life. He needs to try to take down two warriors with drawn swords without trying to kill them. What if he dies in the process…is probably not something she’s thinking. If she was capable of thinking about that, then she wouldn’t ask the things she does of Blois and me, either.

“Hey, Papa, will it be okay?”

“It’ll be fine. Tahlan is strong and Shadow Summoning is flexible. More than anything…”

Tahlan has gotten much stronger since our first encounter. His training under my tutelage has helped, but he’s also sharpened his skills since watching Ran and I fight. At his current skill he should be able to take them down without killing them.

“Diiiiie!”

“Go to hell!”

“Shadow Summoning… Dance of Leaping Stones!”

In front of the pair, despite them swinging their swords down at him from atop their mounts, Tahlan takes a moment to create duplicates. Using the back of its handsome progenitor as a stepping stone, the identical double leaps up above the horses.

“Grrr!”

“Raaah!”

The two riders simultaneously attempt to attack Tahlan as he draws back his sword in mid-air. But that means the two of them are looking upward. From the distance we’re at, we can tell that the leaping Tahlan is a decoy.

“Got you!”

The actual attack comes from two shadows that strike the two from below. The duplicates tackle the two on horseback and drag them to the ground.

“Gah!”

“Dammit!”

However, he’s made sure the two don’t hit the ground directly by having them fall on top of the shadows.

“Oof!”

“Guh!”

The shadows that absorb the impact from their targets falling off the horses disappear, leaving the two lords sprawled on the ground.

Tahlan himself, who had served as the stepping stone for his duplicate, draws his blade and points it at the fallen riders.

“Do you wish to continue?”

“...No.”

“You win... Seems you’ve improved.”

Calmer now, the two are able to admit their defeat. There’s nothing more shameful than refusing to concede, after all. They’re not in a situation so dire they’re willing to choose death if it meant refusing to give up. Having sobered up, the two decide not to further embarrass themselves.

“...Sansui, did you teach him that?” Blois, who had been watching his moves, asks me.

It was an attack that took advantage of reliance on eyesight alone, and there was nothing to call it but impressive. She must think it’s a style I taught him.

“Of course not. He came up with that himself.”

“I see... It wouldn’t work on the same foe a second or third time, but it’s impressive.”

It was good enough to impress Blois. And I think it’s a flexible style of fighting that Tahlan hadn’t bothered developing until now.

“Good job, Tahlan. Just as I expected.”

Having seen Tahlan’s visible increase in skill, Lady Douve smiles in satisfaction.

Part 2 — Completion of Term

“Well done, Tahlan. To restrain us without using lethal force is quite the feat.”

At Lady Douve’s estate, the tea party has restarted with His Fathership and His Brothership in the mix.

“I see you’ve trained hard under Sansui. The tactics using your duplicates are much sharper than before.”

They both seem irate, but not embarrassed. Apparently, they both fully intended to kill him, but were also willing to settle for another outcome. That’s all fine, of course, but I do wish they’d stop trying to murder Lady Douve’s suitors.

“I’ve already explained this to my sister, but… Sansui, Blois. You’re being relieved of your posts as her bodyguards.”

The news from His Brothership, the lord of the house, catches me, Lain, and Blois by surprise. He hadn’t said we were fired, exactly, but it’s still a shock.

We look to Lady Douve, but she only smiles gently in our direction. To people who don’t know her as well as we do, it’d look like a mocking expression.

“Instead, Tahlan will be serving as Douve’s bodyguard. Not alone, of course, but alongside other trustworthy individuals.”

“Having just Blois and Sansui alone as my daughter’s bodyguards was always a tall order. From here on out, we’ll be increasing the size of her escort.”

Even by the standards of this world, evidently it was a bit much to ask just the two of us to protect Lady Douve. It’s true that Blois and I are strong enough to actually pull it off, but it’s also true that we had our hands full the whole time.

“I’m afraid I don’t have the connections to gather such trustworthy individuals in this country…”

“You can recruit from those who’ve trained under Sansui. They may not have the cleanest backgrounds, but still, you may gather the ones you feel are suitable.”

“…As you command.” Tahlan responds respectfully, noting His Fathership’s serious demeanor.

I’m struck by just how thoughtful this family is, despite the recklessness they showed just moments before. All three of them always follow their word. That said, I do wish they’d behave more sensibly outside of that, though.

“Um… What will happen to Papa?” an anxious Lain asks.

“Worry not, Lain. We’ll do right by him,” His Fathership responds with sincerity. He therefore reassures Lain with the same earnestness he directed to Tahlan.

“First, Sansui, Blois. Thank you for your efforts up until now. You have our gratitude.”

“You honor me.”

“I simply did my duty.”

“The fact that my daughter is safe today is thanks to your efforts. As such, it’s now time for us to reward you in turn.”

He’s saying that we’re not being relieved due to lack of ability or because of any failures on our part. We know that this isn’t simple flattery. Both His Fathership and His Brothership don’t play word games of that sort.

“Blois, you in particular.”

“Yes, my lord?”

“Your role was particularly difficult. I don’t doubt your ability, but even then, it must have been a burden upon you. You’ve served us extremely well.”

His Fathership nods in a gesture close to a bow. His Brothership lowers his head in acknowledgment, as well. It’s a subtle gesture that could easily be missed, but it’s an unmistakable gesture of gratitude.

“...You honor me beyond words,” Blois says, intensely moved at the sight.

Of course, Lady Douve and I understand Blois’s feelings all too well. Blois truly did put all of her effort into her job. Having been near her all this time, we know it better than anyone.

“You’ve served loyally since childhood, and this marks the completion of your service. We have no intention of pressing more work upon you. You are no longer required to serve our house.”

“...Thank you!”

Blois can’t help but shed tears. She’s so overcome that she can’t even wipe them away.

“Sansui.”

“Milord.”

“Make sure you make Blois happy. I trust that you’ll be able to do so.”

“Yes, my lord.”

I have no choice but to concur with His Fathership’s request. Honestly, I’m not so certain I can manage it, but I intend to do what I can. It’s certainly true that Blois deserves happiness.

“However, we’d like you to continue working for us, Sansui. We don’t ask that you remain beholden our house forever, but five years’ service is too little for you to retire.”

“Of course.”

I understand what His Brothership is saying, and I’m of the same mind. I suppose I could be characterized as having worked for two generations of Sepaedas, but that’s because he just happened to succeed to the title shortly after I began, not because I’ve served a long time.

It’d be a problem if they asked me to serve them for the next thousand years, but getting let go now would be just as much of a problem. To

achieve my goal of caring for Lain properly, at least until she's ready to stand on her own, will probably take at least another ten years.

"Sansui will be formally assigned to serve as our master of instruction. You've served as my sister's bodyguard for five years, so I doubt any would complain that it's too sudden a move."

"Your skill with the sword — even without your Rare Art — and your abilities as an instructor are both well proven. We'd like you to focus on teaching from this point forward."

It's a promotion, probably a really big promotion. It may very well be the best job I could hope for, given that my skill with the blade is my only asset. I don't have any ambition to climb the ladder in the mortal world anymore, but their trust and being rewarded for my skills still makes me happy.

"I will do my best to live up to your expectations."

Further, I think the actual job is better. I no longer have to guard Lady Douve and can just focus on teaching the sword. Up until now, she's had me fight bandits to pass the time, but that seems like it'll be a thing of the past.

"Sansui and Blois will be getting formally engaged, and as such it is necessary for you to meet her parents. We will provide you with time off to do so."

"You've been working practically without rest until now. Think of it as a holiday and enjoy it."

It's an order that I truly appreciate receiving. Lain, Blois, Tahlan, and Lady Douve all look pleased. Of course, I'm happy as well, but there's something that I need to ask about.

"My Lord, may I respectfully ask…"

"Don't worry about Ran."

His Brothership already knows what I intended to ask about. While she wasn't here now, wouldn't it be a problem if I was gone and Ran returned?

"That's Batterabbe's responsibility. It's not anything for you to concern yourself with."

I understand the reasoning, but I can't quite accept it. After all, it's my immaturity that left her alive.

"What are you implying, Sansui? That the kingdom will fall because you took a vacation?"

I can't help but come to a realization at that moment. It is undeniable that, by thinking this way, I'm overestimating my personal importance.

"You are this kingdom's greatest swordsman. You're the most reliable among the aces, and I believe it's impossible for you to fail. But still, there's no reason to bear all that weight upon your shoulders. There's no need to avoid failure at that high of a price."

It's a concern that far exceeded my role as a swordsman. I should have just accepted their order to take a break.

"Sansui, it may be the most reliable option to leave it to you, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't also hand tasks to other people," His Fathership puts in.

“You may be the most powerful, but you aren’t alone. Take time with your family, at least as long as it takes you to visit your putative in-laws. We’ll make you work hard enough when you return,” says His Brothership.

“Father and Brother are saying this. Don’t embarrass me in front of them,” Lady Douve adds, a bit crossly.

I glance at Lain and Blois. They both look at me expectantly. I then look at Tahlan. He directs a very satisfied expression my way.

“...Prince Tahlan.”

“Yes.”

“May I leave Lady Douve and the sword lessons in your care while I’m gone?”

“Rest assured that I will work toward fulfilling those tasks with every fiber of my being.”

“Then... Respectfully, I’ll go visit Blois’s family.”

Part 3 — Liberation

“Sniff… Finally… It’s finally over…”

After taking our leave, Lain and I lead the sobbing Blois from the room. Having been relieved of her burden, she’s broken out into tears in sheer relief. Blois ordinarily isn’t one to cry, so the weight lifted must have been immense.

“S-So I don’t have to fight anymore…”

“Yeah, that’s right. You don’t need to constantly be on guard anymore.”

“Bwaaaaaaahhh…”

Her reaction is one perfectly understandable for a girl her age. I gently embrace her, and Lain also joins the hug.

“Sniff… Sniffle…”

The reason she’s crying this much isn’t because she hates Lady Douve so much or anything like that. Sure, it’s always been hard dealing with Lady Douve, no question. More than anything, though, serving as a bodyguard to a daughter of House Sepaeda was a source of tremendous, constant worry. If anything had happened to Lady Douve, Blois and her entire family could very well have paid the price. The same was true of me, who served as Lady Douve’s bodyguard simply to raise Lain, and I shared in her relief at the lifting of that heavy weight.

Still, it’s not that Blois and I were feeling the same thing, exactly. Although we received the same news, it didn’t have as much of an impact on me, since I don’t much value my own life.

“You’ve done well, Blois.”

Blois is an extremely talented swordswoman and mage, and there’s no doubting her ability. But unlike the similarly talented Tahlan, she’s not particularly fond of fighting or training. The hard training needed to meet the expectations placed upon her were entirely unwanted.

“Sniff, sniff…”

She had sacrificed so much to do her duty. What’s wrong with crying in relief now that she’s been freed from that?

Lain and I spent some time reassuring her of that fact.

“…”

Having cried her fill, she glances up from my shoulder, blushes, and shrinks back a moment. She then presses her face against my chest. It seems that she’s a little embarrassed.

Thinking about it properly, we’re going to get married. Getting married without any concern for the future…it’s sort of an end-goal for her. While it makes me feel a little guilty about the fact that I’m not going to age from here on out, if I hadn’t become an Immortal, I would have died five hundred years ago, so I want to believe that it’s not all bad for her.

“Hey, Sansui.”

“What is it?”

“I’m not dreaming, am I? That we’ve been relieved of protecting Lady Douve, and that we’re heading out to report our marriage to my family…”

It’s such an important thing to her that she can’t quite grasp that it’s real. I don’t think it’s that odd of an occurrence, myself.

“It’s not a dream, Miss Blois!” Lain answers before I can.

“Alright…”

Blois looks a little conflicted and seems a tad resentful toward Lain. I guess she wanted to hear it from my lips.

“You really did work hard, Blois. You don’t need to fight or train anymore.”

Understanding her feelings, I do my best to follow through. Brightening, Blois smiles happily.

“I see… So I can finally be like a normal girl…”

Then Blois and I both tilt our heads. Yes, Blois is now a normal girl. A noble girl getting engaged. Just what is a normal noble daughter in that situation supposed to do?

“…What’s wrong?” Lain asks, tilting her head in curiosity.

Here’s a dilemma that my daughter, who’s grown up as an ordinary girl in an upper-class household, can’t possibly understand. I can only thank House Sepaeda for making sure that Lain doesn’t have to deal with this. Blois and I barely resist the urge to rub at our temples.

“Um, Lain… As a normal girl what am I supposed to do, exactly?”

“Huh?” Lain seems at a complete loss.

No doubt she can’t understand why that would be a problem for Blois. It’s like if a noblewoman who hadn’t ever held a sword suddenly tried to pick up a blade. That Blois, who’s trained since childhood in blade and magic, wouldn’t know how to live as a normal noblewoman…is perfectly understandable.

“…Reaaally~~?”

Lain looks extremely disappointed. I wish she wouldn’t turn that gaze our way.

That it’s normal for adults to indulge in romance, to get married, and work hard at one’s job… That sort of thing is a sweet illusion reserved for children. The reality is that it takes an extraordinary amount of effort to achieve even one of those things.

“Frankly, I never had the breathing room to do anything like that…”

“Same for me. Thinking about it, we’ve really been living in such a small bubble…”

Blois and I basically have no connections outside of work. We’ve been living to protect Lady Douve; outside of that, we spent all our time training. We basically had no private time, and it was impossible for Blois to make normal friends. It was unavoidable at the time, to be sure, but now that she doesn’t have to train, she just doesn’t know what to do.

“You’ve done nothing wrong, Blois. It’ll just take time to get used to it.”

“You say that, Sansui… But this realization makes me want to cry…”

A swordswoman with such talent that the Royal Guard tried to recruit her… Just what was the point of her life until now?

“Don’t worry about it, Blois.”

“Sansui…”

“I mean, in my case, it’s been five hundred years of that!”

“Yeah… Um, right…”

Dangit, self-deprecation isn’t working. Sure, it’s a *lot* of self-deprecating humor, but it’s so far out of the realm of the ordinary that Blois couldn’t figure out how to react.

“Anyway, why don’t we just give it a try. While I can’t think of anything specific, we’re not in any hurry.”

“I can’t think of anything either… But I’d like to hurry a little bit…”

As lovers, as those with a lot of free time, we can’t figure out what to do. But since we’ve been liberated from our responsibilities, we want to do *something*. I can feel the panic welling up inside Blois.

“Hey, Papa, you can’t think of anything?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Reaaally~~?”

“I’ve been protecting Lady Douve since I left Master Suiboku’s side… Blois isn’t that different.”

“Then you just need to do what Lady Douve is doing.”

Blois and I soberly try to remember just what Lady Douve was doing in front of us. It was a difficult, bitter road.

“Can’t copy her…”

“Wouldn’t want to copy her…”

Neither Blois nor I can’t be that obnoxious. And even if we did ape her mannerisms, it’s hard to think that we’d enjoy it. Lady Douve’s the only one who could possibly enjoy that, really.

“Thaaat’s not ittttt~~. You just need to do what she was doing with Prince Tahlan earlier.”

Blois and I exchange glances. While I have a sour expression on my face, Blois blushes and looks a bit bashful. We can’t do that, either.

“Lain…”

“What is it, Papa?”

“We can’t manage that.”

“Don’t give up before you try!”

“Please don’t make us try it.”

Lain is pouting, but I really didn’t want to do that. That interaction worked because two beautiful people were doing it with a touch of playfulness. Blois is certainly beautiful, but I’m hardly an Adonis, and neither of us have the breathing room to be playful. Are we supposed to try anyway, even knowing that we’ll fail?

“…No, let’s try it, Sansui.”

Unexpectedly, Blois recovers from her shyness.

“Let’s try that ourselves! For our own sake!”

To reenact the scene we saw earlier on our own... I guess people want to try to recreate things that they admire in others. But I still don't want to...

"Sansui..."

"Papa..."

I can feel their eyes boring into me.

Wait, since I don't have anything to lose, why am I hesitating? If I stop here without doing anything, how am I going to teach my students without seeming like a hypocrite?

And more than anything, I should fulfill the wishes of my future wife and my daughter. Isn't making them happy what I should do as a husband, as a father, and as a man?

"Alright, let's do it!"

This is how we, without any relation by blood, become a family...!

I set up a table and chairs in my room, and thus recreated the setting for the tea party held by Lady Douve and Tahlan. Lain watches with intense curiosity, as Blois sits blushing in a chair.

"Mmm..."

Blois sure is cute. She is, without exaggeration or flattery, adorable. To be able to marry such a woman must mean I'm quite blessed.

"Miss Blois! Go on and say it!"

"Y-You make it sound so easy..."

"Just like earlier!"

"Mmmph... I-I can't!"

Blois holds her head. She looks like she's so embarrassed that her face is about to erupt into flames.

"I don't know what I need to do or what I need to say...!"

I'm the same way, so I can hardly talk. Even Lain probably doesn't have any specific suggestions.

"Just do the same thing they were doing earlier! 'Say, Tahlan, have you improved since apprenticing yourself to Sansui? Should I have him train you more?'"

Wow, good memory, Lain. Could it be that she remembers everything, line by line? She really is smart...too smart to be my daughter. Though, I mean, we're not actually related by blood, and I've left most of her education to House Sepaeda.

"Go on! Say, 'Say, Tahlan,' and smile teasingly!"

"Err, mmph... 'S-Say, Tahlan'..."

"That's not right! Try harder!"

We're now just play-acting. I mean, given the character names are still the same, it's completely play-acting. Lain seems satisfied with that, but is Blois aware of what she's doing?

"S-Say, Tahlan, have you improved since apprenticing yourself to Sansui?"

She hasn't noticed.

“Should I have him train you more?”

“Now, Papa! You say, ‘Oh ho, I had thought you’d prefer to have more time with me.’”

Why do I have to train myself exactly? But not saying that aloud is what it means to be a grown-up. I’m five hundred years old, so there’s no need to be pedantic.

“Oh ho, I had thought you’d prefer to have more time with me.”

I’m trying not to show my embarrassment in my expression or attitude, so I think I’m doing better than Blois. But it’s a line that doesn’t fit me at all. No matter how you look at it, they’re not words that come from my brain. They feel really weird coming out of my lips.

“Good job, Papa!”

“O-Oh, ohohoh…!”

It’s not a line suited to me, but the two of them seem to like it. Could it be that the two of them aren’t looking for me to seem like myself? I feel a little hurt by that, but even without thinking about it, I suppose that’s true. This isn’t the time to be myself; it’s time to show off!

“Miss Blois!”

“O-Oh right…! I-I would like more of this sort of time…”

“That’s not it! It’s ‘Oh, my, do I seem such a needy woman to you? I almost find that offensive.’”

Lain pushes on ahead, and she even seems a little angry. She may want us to take it seriously, but Blois really is. I guess this might be the difference in age. It seems like it’s all the same, but if I say that aloud, I’m pretty much stepping into old-man territory.

“Oh my… Do I seem such a needy woman to you? I almost find that offensive… S-Say, Lain…”

Evidently realizing the oddness of the situation, Blois is now embarrassed for another reason. At this rate, it’ll seem like she’s got a crush on Tahlan.

“Why don’t we stop for now?”

“Why?!”

But Lain seems really angry. She clearly has her own ideas.

“Then what are you going to do? How are you two going to flirt?”

Lain puffs out her cheeks in a pout. Regardless, keeping this up is cruel to Blois. As a father and as a husband, I need to try a little harder. Since I usually don’t fulfill my role as father or husband all that often, I need to put my foot down here.

“Hey, Lain.”

“What?!”

I wonder. Just what is a father and husband supposed to do at a time like this?

“What do you want me to do?”

“Don’t ask me that!”

I’m the very worst as both a father and as a husband. It’s not like we don’t get along. Actually, we do get along quite well, but we’re still not very experienced as a family. Though, what does it even mean to be an experienced family? Perhaps we need to start with a definition there.

Up until now it’s always been the four of us, Lady Douve included, with Lady Douve calling the shots. Phrasing it negatively, we were dragged around according to Lady Douve’s whims, but phrased positively, it means that we could get away with just following her instructions. Which is why we’re a bit awkward when given freedom to act…

“At the very least… Lain, this is mean to Blois, so please stop pushing her.”

“Boo.”

Of course, it’s not easy on Lain, either, but we need to stop and change tacks. No one’s going to be happy at this rate.

“In my opinion… I think it’s too early for me to imitate Lady Douve.”

“I think it’s forever out of reach.”

“When you say forever, it doesn’t sound like a metaphor… But that might be true. I’m not really suited for it.”

Blois and I have both reached the conclusion that this isn’t the way to go. It’s disappointing for Lain, who wants us to keep going, but I think there are definitely things we’re suited for and things we’re unsuited for.

“Then what’s the right way?”

A disappointed Lain hurries us along toward a solution. Both Blois and I also think we need a solution, and soon. But when we stop to think, there’s a long, lingering silence.

“Do we really have to hurry to come to a conclusion?”

“You’re right, we don’t!”

The conclusion ended up being to put things on hold, and Blois agreed with it immediately. Her expression is excited, but it seems she’s relieved to hear it.

“If you keep it up at that pace, you’ll be old before you know it!”

“That won’t happen.”

I caution Lain for her extreme statement, but it’s not convincing coming from me.

“That might be true…”

Blois, who had felt relief at putting things on hold, suddenly feels a sense of urgency. If I try to make age-related arguments, then I guess the other extreme is necessary as a counter. But I’m pretty sure if I said, ‘Yeah, you’ll be an old woman in no time~~’ it’d be a serious problem in and of itself.

“…Then why don’t we start trying tomorrow. She won’t be an old woman tomorrow, will she?”

“My teacher said that putting things off until tomorrow is what lazy people say! You have to start trying today, start trying right now!”

Lain learned a good lesson. Since Blois and I value hard work, her words are hard to deny. But if we try right now, we'll just end up missing the mark.

"When beginners put in effort, sometimes they make things worse."

"…Hey, Papa, don't you want to be lovey-dovey?"

"I do. But I don't know how to do it."

I'd forgotten about my original goals over the last few centuries, but I first apprenticed myself to my master because I wanted to flirt with girls. While it ended up being a lot of effort for little gain, I do want to spend time being affectionate with Blois. I just don't know what that means.

Blois is in agreement. She nods intently without a word.

"Papa, do you have no dreams? Things you want to do, things you want to see?"

I'd probably get yelled at for saying it, but as an Immortal, I don't have a libido, so I can't think of the right way to woo her. Of course, there had been times like this before… But those things just happened naturally. It wasn't something I could just summon up on the spot.

"Blois is my bride, and you're my daughter. Is that not enough?"

"Not at all."

I try to pass things off with a nice line, but she sees right through it. Words are evidently worthless, so clearly I need to show it with my actions.

"What about you, Miss Blois?"

"I'd like him to be gentle, but I'd also like him to be forceful… What am I saying?" Blois answers honestly, then immediately regrets her words.

Why are we struggling to come up with what we're supposed to be as a couple with a young girl and getting our proposals rejected?

"And what did you feel about that, Papa?"

"I wanted the same thing."

"That's totally wrong."

I think that if Blois came on to me aggressively, I'd go with the flow and it'd work out pretty well. If anything, I'd prefer that outcome. I guess we're both pretty passive.

"…Hey, Papa. Did you ever see your parents do that sort of thing?"

"I don't remember, and even if I did, I wouldn't have wanted to know."

Putting myself in Lain's place, I don't recall ever wanting to see my parents be affectionate. No, more the opposite; I would've wanted to avoid that at all costs. My parents mostly linger in the far-off reaches of my memories. They didn't have a bad relationship, but they weren't particularly affectionate, either.

At the time, I don't think I had any problem with that. If anything, it was the best solution. I'm pretty sure I would've ended up more rebellious if my parents were all lovey-dovey while I was struggling through puberty. As such, I can't empathize with Lain's desire to see Blois and I be affectionate.

"Mrrm…"

I can’t empathize with her, but I can understand. It’s still a hard problem for me to solve, though.

“Lain. I understand your feelings, but let’s hold off until tomorrow. Today’s just a day for celebrating.”

“Yeah… Yes. Given that I don’t have to fight anymore.”

“…Okay.”

I’ll repeat this, but we’re quite close. There’s no doubting that point when it comes to the three of us.

“Maybe I’ll have Lady Douve order you two to be all flirty.”

Don’t do that, Lain. I mean, it might end up that way in the end, but I really don’t want Lady Douve controlling that much of our lives.

Part 4 — Future

“My apologies to you all, but I will be returning temporarily to the House Sepaeda territories. Depending on the circumstances, this may take several months. I ask for your forbearance.”

Since I’m going to meet Blois’s parents, it of course means that my instruction is on pause during that time. I’d gathered the swordsmen under my tutelage to give them the news. Most of them seem unhappy to hear it, but none of them voice their frustration.

The instruction itself was done without charge, and it’s not like I’m going to be away for a long time. No one ended up doing anything stupid like asking me not to go meet her parents or saying that they were going to accompany us.

“Once I return, I’ll formally turn over the duty of guarding Lady Douve to Prince Tahlan and become House Sepaeda’s weapons instructor.”

Putting an end to protecting Lady Douve and formally focusing on my instruction… Most of them seem pleased by that idea, since it means that my instruction will now take priority. They might even be happy that I’ve gotten a promotion. It’d be nice if that was the case.

“As Prince Tahlan takes over as escort, he’ll need skilled subordinates… If there are any among you who’d like to volunteer…?”

It’s worth mentioning, albeit a bit late, that those receiving my tutelage are getting a small stipend from House Sepaeda. For the most part, it’s closer to just being given room and board, but they’re not without shelter, and they’re not starving. Still, that’s not exactly comfortable for them, and their social status remains rather low. They’re not even mercenaries at this point, closer to disposable fodder getting an allowance, and few of them are content with their current lot.

Of course, that’s not true of those who are actually Royal Guardsmen in disguise, but they’re only a small part of the greater whole. Immortals like me or my master can get by without food or water, but it’s ridiculous to expect that of ordinary people. Training with the sword doesn’t fill one’s belly. It’s odd coming from me, who struggles to even remember hunger or thirst, but no doubt all of them would be happy to be formally employed by House Sepaeda. After all, plenty of them came here with that goal in mind in the first place.

“As Master Sansui says, I’ve been tasked with protecting Lady Douve from now on. Still, I can’t possibly do it on my own; as such, I would like to borrow your strength. It will mean you become formal retainers of House Sepaeda, so I’d like you to consider it seriously.”

However, no one rejoices at hearing Tahlan’s pitch. Tahlan is plenty popular among the men, so they’re probably not hesitating at being subordinate to him. As such, they’re simply not all that excited at the prospect of serving Lady Douve. I can’t find a way to defend her on that front.

“Thank you for taking this on.”

“No, no, I knew this would happen. She’s extremely proud and holds others to high standards. She has a level of elegance that only oddballs like myself would consider approaching.”

Is that really just pride or something else? I can’t help but wonder. While Tahlan describes himself as an oddball, if anything, Tahlan’s the one who’s elegant and Lady Douve the one who’s an oddball.

“And gathering people is my duty. To be able to convince the most worthy among this group of swordsmen to join my cause…that’s an exciting challenge in and of itself. There’s no fun in walking a well-trodden road.”

Everyone looks intently at him as he speaks brightly. Like me, they’re all feeling a sort of envy toward him. He really does seem to be approaching this new work with relish. He shines in a way that one can only describe as regal.

“I’ll most certainly succeed, Master Sansui.”

To be admired by this man, to be involved with this man, to be able to help this man grow stronger… He’s the sort of wonderful person that makes me feel pride in all of those things. I admit, though, it’s a little disappointing that his assignment is to guard Lady Douve. I’d like him to be assigned to a task that’s a little more noble. But it’s true that he’s happy about it, and it’s also something His Brothership and His Fathership have decided upon. I’ll just stick to thinking it and not bother saying it out loud.

“I think it might be better not to succeed.”

Naturally, one of the students says out loud what I was thinking. Looks like my point of view isn’t that far off from the average person’s in this instance.

“You ought to keep such sentiments to yourself. You never know who might be listening.”

Tahlan goes a step further. He pretends not to hear, but instead offers some appropriate advice. Does even he still have some common sense lurking within? Which in turn makes me wonder, does he really love Lady Douve? I’m really not sure about that one.

“Errrm, um, Master Sansui?” one of the students says, trying to ask me a question.

“Does marrying Miss Blois mean you’re going to become a noble?”

“It seems so. I won’t be given any land, so it’s not all that grand.”

Some people clearly would like me to aim higher. If I, the strongest in the kingdom, end up as a noble without his own lands, it means the swordsmen training under me can’t hope for more than that. However, that’s simply because they’re not taking the work of the nobility seriously enough. Given that I haven’t been educated in governing a fief properly, I’d have trouble actually overseeing my own lands. It’s like telling someone who’s never held a sword in their life to teach swordsmanship.

By that logic, I really think Saiga's in a hard spot. Though, maybe a lord of one of the Four Great Houses just ends up putting his signature on everything… That might just be a stereotype, though.

Anyway, since I don't know what sort of work His Brothership and His Fathership do, I'm really not in any position to comment. Talking about things one doesn't know about, based solely on one's own imagination, is the sort of thing that the arrogant and the ignorant do.

"I couldn't rule a fief or command soldiers, after all. I would much rather not be given work that I can't manage."

"In Master Sansui's case, you'd charge in alone and kill them all by yourself. If you were asked to be a general, of course you'd decline."

I feel like that was a bit of a casual putdown, but it was also true. Since I don't need sleep or food, and can fight while taking weapons from my enemies, it's easiest for me to go in alone and wipe them out by myself.

"But why do you ask?"

"If you were going to become a lord, Master Sansui, I thought I might ask you to hire me."

Isn't that nepotism of a sort? I guess that's normal in this world, but I still can't quite get over the optics of it. Then again, I was picked up on the side of the road, so I suppose I'm in no position to lecture anyone else. For that matter, picking Lady Douve's bodyguards out of the students assembled here can be considered a form of nepotism, too.

"Yeah, same."

"Yup, yup."

For me, it seemed to come out of nowhere, but it seems there are a fair number of people thinking the same thing. It's understandable that they'd prefer serving someone they know over a random noble they've never met, though.

At the very least, there's the possibility of being hired by a patron worse than Lady Douve. While Lady Douve is hardly a model employer, she does, at the very least, hold on to the bare minimums expected of an employer. No doubt there are nobles who can't even manage that in this kingdom. Since I've met the Domino Empire's émigré nobles, I know that not all nobles are wonderful people.

Still, even His Brothership and His Fathership wouldn't force them into House Sepaeda's own standard army. As such, their employers would be nobles serving House Sepaeda, likely ones they've never met.

"There's no need to worry about new opportunities, and no doubt you'll be getting a letter of introduction from His Lordship, so I doubt they'd treat you poorly on that account."

While it might sound a bit insulting coming from me, there's no way that a subordinate noble will treat a swordsman introduced to them by their feudal lord with disrespect. There's nothing to be gained from that, after all.

My students, like me, are all men who only have their blades to live on. Being the elite soldiers of some regional lord is perhaps what they're best

suited for, and they won't push people around unnecessarily or drain their lord's pocketbook too much by being employed there.

"Still, if you end up causing problems with the employer, I'll go and settle the matter myself. Please remember your place and continue your training to avoid dishonoring Their Lordships' names."

I meant it as a playful warning, but Tahlan and the others look deathly serious. Did the fact that I beat Ran up in public or that I lined up a bunch of severed heads damage my reputation? That neither of those things are misunderstandings but instead simple reality is what makes this such a headache. Even I have to admit that I've earned my fair share of infamy.

"We are all aware that you're a kind man, Master Sansui, but we are also aware of how loyally you've served House Sepaeda, and how you strive to keep your personal views out of your work. That is why your warning holds so much weight with the others," a slightly tense Tahlan says, trying to reassure me.

Yes, well, it's good that they heard my warning. I don't want to be going around lopping my own students' heads off, but if ordered to do so, I'd have to do it.

"A-Anyway… I will become House Sepaeda's weapons instructor. So long as all of you continue working within House Sepaeda's affiliated lands, we'll always be connected. If called, I'll answer, so feel free to ask for my help at any time."

Another student raises his hand. He doesn't seem to be cowering in fear, so I don't think he's still lingering on the previous subject.

"I'm happy to be introduced to an employer, but I don't know if I have the skill to call myself one of your pupils… I'd like a few more years of training."

This student's words are touching. Personally, I'd be happy to help them along not just for years, but decades, indeed until the day they died. But that's probably too much, and I doubt that they want that, either. It may be that they're taking their efforts seriously, but being permanently stuck in training wouldn't let them contribute to society, after all.

"That would be…difficult. You are all being fed by House Sepaeda, so you cannot go against their instructions. I understand that you're not all confident in your current ability, but you also can't avoid how others might see you in terms of skill."

While they may think they're weak, the world writ large thinks they're perfectly capable on their own. And if they actually have that skill, then that's not such a bad thing. As Master Suiboku's apprentice, I feel the same way.

"Compared to Master Suiboku, I'm still a fledgling. I always feel a bit embarrassed when the Sacred Treasures compare me to my master in his younger years."

I say that quite confidently, thinking to myself that we're all of a similar mind, but my listeners seem displeased by my words. They were afraid of

me earlier, and now they're displeased. Could it be that I'm not actually all that admired by them? I find myself losing confidence in my ability as a sword instructor.

"Master Sansui... If you say that, none of us will have a leg to stand on."

I didn't mean it as self-deprecation, just as a statement of fact.

"I suppose you're right... I'm now accepted as the kingdom's greatest swordsman. No doubt if I slouch to make myself look less imposing, it'll only just annoy people. If you are all struggling to have confidence in your ability, then the only thing to do is to continue training in your new jobs and gain the necessary experience. Training isn't all about being tutored by your master."

I decide to wrap things up in a simple way, because otherwise there's no end in sight to all of this.

"I'll be leaving tomorrow. You need not come see us off, so please focus on your training."

Part 5 — On the Road

Having seen my students go off, I'm starting to understand how the Regent feels. When I was sent out to the world by my master, he'd certified that I'd reached a certain standard of ability. And in truth, I had the skill to be considered the most powerful man in the mortal world.

However, my own students aren't that strong. While they have the potential to grow further, their lives are too short to put in anywhere near enough training. It's certainly a bit vexing to have to send off students who I can train further in such an incomplete state. I'm still their master, and I have a responsibility to set them properly on their path in life.

Teaching them swordplay is one thing, but so is helping them figure out how to make the most of their lives. Which is precisely what my master wanted of me, and what I want to do myself. But it's not like I can accomplish that perfectly for each and every one of them, and it's not as though I have much experience in terms of that kind of work.

"Hrm."

Therefore, I'm entirely reliant on His Brothership and His Fathership on all of this. I'm embarrassed by being so happy to focus exclusively on teaching. Of course, those two are people in a position of authority, so they had a certain amount of calculation in mind when they decided to recruit them. I just happened to follow those instructions, without any need to make a decision on my own.

All I can do is swing my sword, and that I take for granted that I only need to do that must be a problem. As an adult, I need to stand on my own and be able to think about things myself.

"Hrm."

Think about what jobs are appropriate for my students as I teach them swordsmanship, and then teach them in a way that they can do those jobs... I know it's something that's a lot easier said than done, but just because it's difficult doesn't mean it's something I should just give up on. Only teaching swordsmanship because I'm their sword instructor isn't doing right by them. Indeed, maybe I should try doing jobs other than guarding and sword instruction.

"Papa!" Lain yells at me as I let my thoughts wander. "Why are you sitting there quietly thinking?!"

I'm currently inside a carriage heading for Blois's family lands. Of course, Lain and Blois are with me.

"Sorry, I was thinking about my work. I can't stop thinking about the futures of the people I'm teaching."

"Aren't you supposed to be off today?!"

"I know, I know, but..."

"Look, Miss Blois's all dressed up! At least compliment her! You're pretty, you're beautiful, you're cute!"

Ordinarily, or rather up until now, Blois had worn men's clothing at Lady Douve's wishes. But now that she's finished with that role and is heading back to her family's estate, she's wearing a dress worthy of a young noblewoman.

But, while I'm sure that'll get me yelled at, whether she looks good or not in her dress, her expression is completely that of a child. Given that she'd always had a serious, almost dour expression for as long as I've known her, seeing Blois have a relaxed expression that makes her look so much younger is a first for me.

"I told her before we set off."

"Tell her multiple times!"

"Won't it get old?"

"Miss Blois looks sad right now!"

I once again look at Blois sitting in front of me.

"Hehe."

At the very least, she seems happy to me, even without reading her aura.

"Hehehe."

It's like she's in a dream, like she's floating in a euphoric cloud, as she's being rocked back and forth in the carriage. No doubt she's giddy at the fact that she's in the midst of a girly event that includes wearing cute clothes and heading to meet her parents with her fiancé in tow. Doesn't seem like she's paying much attention at all to what's going on around her.

"She doesn't look very sad to me."

"She's sad!"

My daughter Lain ignores reality and pushes her argument on me. But I do understand what Lain wants to say. We're finally going on a vacation and her father's off thinking about work while her mother's all giddy and excited. Of course that's not going to be fun; it's thoughtless, even by my standards.

"Alright... Well, then, what should we do?"

I'm hesitant to interrupt Blois when she's already enjoying herself. She's currently wrapped in the greatest amount of happiness she's known in her life, and that happiness isn't a mirage, it's real. Since she's living her dream, I can't quite bring myself to wake her from it.

"Hey, Lain."

"Yes, Papa?"

"Why don't we do something as father and daughter?"

"And leave Miss Blois out of it?! Isn't Miss Blois part of our family, too?!"

I know what she's trying to say, and I think she's grown into a really good girl, but in this case, isn't it better to let Blois bask in her happiness? I don't want to interrupt her joyful reflections.

"If we're friendly without her, I'm sure she'll be hurt!"

"I suppose..."

Dreams do eventually end. If Lain and Blois were being friendly while I wasn't paying attention, I probably wouldn't mind. If anything, I'd find the

scene heartwarming. But what about in Blois's case? Would she feel left out if Lain and I were doing father-daughter things?

"Do something romantic with her!"

"I'm not confident that I can."

I felt this the other day, too, but I don't have enough experience to be able to do it on demand. But, even then, I really do have to do something about this. For better or for worse, Blois and I are similar. If I do what I'd want her to do to me, it should be okay.

As such, I have to be aggressive and make a move on her. Take the initiative myself, instead of leaving it all to her. Making the moment right instead of just waiting for the right moment to arrive. I suppose I'm not really taking the initiative, since Lain's telling me to do it, but let's put that aside for now.

"Hey, Blois."

I approach Blois, who's still staring off into the distance, and take her hand.

"Since we're on our honeymoon, why don't we spend more time being intimate?"

"Oh… O-Of course!"

Noticing that I've taken her hand, Blois hurriedly tries to shake it free. It's all very cute and pure, but I can't let her go now. I decided I'm going to be aggressive, so I don't let go of her hand. This isn't as strange as it sounds. All I'm doing is taking my bride's hand during our honeymoon.

"S-Sansui…"

Blois looks over at me affectionately. Fortunately, she didn't try to free her hand with all the force at her disposal. If she had, I might have gotten hurt in the process.

"Papa… That's great."

Ah, it seems to meet Lain's standards, as well. Everyone in our family's happy with it. If there's a problem, it's that none of us knows what to do next.

"Hey, Blois."

"W-What is it?"

"What should we do next?"

I went in aggressively and then promptly ran aground. We're now in a bit of a stalemate.

"I-I think we're good as we are, yes."

"Alright, then. That's good."

"That's not good at all!"

Blois has been cheerful all this time, but Lain is displeased. It's become a bit of a difficult situation. Or rather, it's been a difficult situation the entire time.

"Papa! Come on, you have something else, right?!"

"No, I don't."

I don’t have much in the way of desire, which is a problem at a time like this. Still, even before I became an Immortal, I probably would’ve ended up like Blois is now. I can’t blame *everything* on becoming an Immortal.

“Papa! Kiss Miss Blois!”

Finally losing her patience, Lain suggests something provocative. Perhaps she decided to put up an extreme example because she couldn’t think of something more appropriate.

“Kiiisss?!”

It goes without saying, but it wasn’t me who panicked. Blois, though, lets out an odd noise unworthy of a lady. She’s wearing elegant clothing, but there’s no elegance to her mannerisms. Not that that’s a bad thing; honestly, I found it endearing. I’d spent years working as a bodyguard at her side. So to see her lose her cool like this made me happy, realizing that she no longer had to put on a strong face.

“W-Wait, Lain! If we do that now, I’d die of embarrassment!”

“Oh c’monnnnn~! Lady Douve said that when you say things like that is when you most want to be kissed.”

“L-Lady Douve isn’t wrong! In truth, I do want him to kiss me! Or rather I’ve dreamed of that! B-But... But! It still feels a bit early!”

The two of them seem to be enjoying themselves in all their excitement, but I honestly would rather not right now. It’s not that I’m ignoring what Lain wants, but kissing my fiancee at a young girl’s behest is going too far, even for what little masculine pride I have left.

“This sort of thing, well... Or rather, um... Sansui’s a little scary, or rather...”

Seems like she’s just overwhelmed by her emotions and is having trouble putting together her thoughts, so she’s unable to explain such things to Lain, who isn’t old enough yet to understand them anyway.

“I’m sorry, Sansui... Could you leave the carriage for a moment... Right now, being with you... I feel my chest tighten, and it’s just too much for me...”

Blois seems to have lost her vocabulary as well. If Lady Douve were here, no doubt she’d look very amused.

“P-Please don’t look at me... I don’t want you to see me like this. I just need to calm down...”

“Ah, alright. Lain, I’m going to go talk to the driver. Could you stay with Blois for a while?”

Lain looks a little unhappy, but Blois is simply too excited, so she accepts this without complaint. In truth, Blois is having trouble controlling her emotions for the first time in her life, and no doubt she doesn’t understand what’s happening right now, either. As such, she needs a bit of time to herself.

“Now... Hello.”

“Well, it seems you’re having some issues...”

The one driving the House Sepaeda carriage is our usual elderly carriage driver. It seems that he has his own thoughts about the matter and there are tears welling up in his eyes after the conversation in the carriage. This driver, because he knows us so well, must have been moved by our interaction. Thinking about it, I've known him a rather long time, too.

"But I'm glad to hear that you all seem to be enjoying yourselves. Yes, indeed."

"...Yes, I suppose."

We really were holding back a lot more than I thought due to Lady Douve's presence. I once again realize just how powerful a presence she is in our lives. We no longer have to purposefully go into dangerous territory or feed bandits to mountain wolves or anything of the sort.

"If possible... I'd like to give Miss Lain's younger sisters and younger brothers a ride in this carriage."

"Heh... Then I suppose we'll have to hurry."

"Yes... A person's life is over so quickly," the driver reflects rather insightfully. The man's got so much more life experience than I do.

From inside the carriage came the auras of Blois, who's still grappling with the giddiness of being on her honeymoon, and Lain, who's a bit unhappy at having to witness all this. The driver, too, feels that presence from inside. That's just how excited the two of them are.

"Lady Blois is certainly in a difficult position, having to be both a lover and a mother at the same time."

"That's... Yes, I suppose you're right."

She would prefer to slowly develop a relationship, complete with all the ups and downs of a budding romance, but Lain wants to see an ideal husband and wife right now. There's definitely a gap in their perspectives.

"Master Sansui, pay no mind to this old man and treasure your time with your family. This is my job, after all."

"Yes. My apologies for disturbing you."

Part 6 — Curiosity

Returning to the carriage, I settle down next to Blois. Having noted that she's calmed down a bit, I take her hand and ponder what to talk about.

Sitting in front of us, Lain's emitting an awfully intimidating aura in my direction. It's a bit harsh to say about someone so young, but right now Lain's the one ruining the moment.

"So... This is maybe a bit late to ask, but Blois?"

"Wh...What is it?"

"What's your family like?"

It's definitely a little late to ask this sort of thing, and I briefly question my own character. I'm going to visit my fiancee's family to inform them of our engagement, and I don't even know what her family is like. For Lain, it seems to have been a different subject from what she expected, but one that interests her, so she offers no complaint.

"What are they like? I mean, just your ordinary local lord and his family."

In my case, I'm only familiar with the heads of the Four Great Houses, but the way Blois is phrasing it, no doubt it means they're not much different from normal people. I doubt they'll be like His Brothership or His Fathership and try to kill me just for wooing Blois.

"My father is the lord and my mother is wife... I have an older sister who's married into another family, an older brother who is the heir, and a sister who's a little younger than I am. My older siblings evidently have children already, so I guess there's a few more people other than that."

Blois doesn't seem upset that her fiancé took this long to ask about her family and explains this all rather calmly.

"When I was little, it seems we were in charge of a rather poor realm and struggled quite a bit. But when I became Lady Douve's bodyguard, we were given a prosperous territory as a reward."

"Oh, wow, so that's what happened..." Lain says, reacting with surprise.

From her view, Blois being Lady Douve's bodyguard was what she regarded as normal, so it must feel to her like she just got to see the truth lurking behind that reality. I mean, that's true of me, too.

"It's nothing surprising. Sure, it's rare for a woman to be in the position I'm in, but it's quite common for men. Besides, in terms of fighting for your family, Sansui's doing the same thing," Blois replies calmly. "Fortunately, I had talent and eventually had Sansui by my side. Now that I've fulfilled my duty and come out of it intact, it's just another funny anecdote."

Blois fought for her family and her efforts were finally rewarded. She seemed extremely relieved and all the tension had bled out of her body.

"Anyway, there shouldn't be any problems with my family. My brother will be the heir, and I'm going to be marrying you, so there won't be any complications."

She smiles, noting that because both the issue of the family territory and the succession are decided, it'll be a stress-free visit to see her family.

It’s true, I would find it hard to take my fiancé to see my family if they were really poor or if there was an internal struggle going on over who would inherit their wealth or titles.

“Um, say, Miss Blois. Are you sure they won’t mind me?”

“No need to worry about that, Lain. You’re a well behaved child, and I’ve already told them about you in my letters home, so they won’t treat you like a stranger.”

Lain looks anxious, perhaps worried about the fact that she’s adopted. Blois reassures her accordingly, but that raises another concern on my end.

“Hey Blois, just how much does your family know about us?”

Lain and I are hardly normal. In my case, I’ve been alive for over five hundred years, and in Lain’s case, she’s the last survivor of a fallen imperial dynasty. Of course, while I might be over five hundred years old, I’ve only been involved in the mortal world for the last five years or so, so I don’t have any real connection to anyone other than the Eight Sacred Treasures, who know me through my master. And in Lain’s case, we’ve already settled the most dangerous lingering issues. The only remaining thing is that in the future, Lain’s daughter or grandchildren will marry into the ruling family in the neighboring country.

Still, are these things we should tell Blois’s parents? Or do they already know? That was something I’d forgotten to ask. I really can be a bit careless at times.

“I believe the Lord Emeritus and Lord Sepaeda have already informed them. They’ve probably told them everything that needs to be said.”

That’s pretty impressive in its own right. I mean, even if it’s coming from the lords of the main branch of House Sepaeda, some of our situation can be pretty hard to believe. It’s not that I need them to believe it, but I don’t like the idea of them being skeptical, either.

“Say, Miss Blois. What do you think their opinion is about you marrying Papa?”

Even if they don’t mind Lain, there’s a decent possibility that they wouldn’t want to deal with me. I mean, at a glance, I’m just a poor foreigner, and my background is completely unknown, so I couldn’t exactly blame them if they object.

“Well… My parents… I only meet them every once in a while, and I mostly know them through exchanging letters, but according to the Lord Emeritus… They are kites who bore a hawk.”

Now that’s quite the expression. I don’t know if he’s praising them or insulting them.

“That means…this isn’t the best way to phrase it but… My parents are ‘normal’ nobles. Given the Lord of House Sepaeda backs Sansui unconditionally, no doubt they won’t think too deeply about it and instead choose to celebrate.”

Sure, it sounds a little materialistic, but they don’t really have the mindset to question what those in authority tell them. Though, really, just

how little interest did we have in one another? I admit that I find that part of me less than pleasant. Hearing the stories about my master from the Sacred Treasures, I wondered why my master never told me anything about himself in our five hundred years together, but I guess I was never all that interested in the person I'd spent the last five years with.

"B-But anyway, Sansui! Aren't you hungry?" Blois suddenly asks, as though she just remembered something.

"...Hungry...Hungry..."

I had just been invited to eat for the first time in five hundred years. Though I've worked for House Sepaeda for the last five years, I haven't eaten once in that time, and no one's ever asked me about that, either. I appreciated the lack of questions, but I guess that also meant that no one was particularly interested in that aspect of me, either. Or rather, thinking about it rationally, they probably just couldn't imagine a human being could go five years without eating anything at all.

"Well, I haven't eaten anything in the last five hundred years or so..."

"Of course! So, just in case... I prepared sandwiches!"

"Wow!"

At Blois's remark, Lain's excitement level climbs. I see, Blois made sandwiches for me... I'm certainly happy, but I can't muster up much excitement.

Dangit, this is the sort of thing I was hoping for when I was brought to this world five hundred years ago. And the truth is, I'm pretty happy about it, but I'm not as excited as Lain or Blois. I'd already realized this, but I've abandoned too much. Given the circumstances, I should be happier and showing a bit more excitement.

I think about how I should've tried harder in my last life, and start feeling regret welling up. Perhaps I should have spent some time enjoying the mortal world before starting my Immortal training.

"Papa, are you crying from joy?"

"S-Sansui?! Y-You're that happy?! F-For you to cry! You must be really happy!"

So this is what they mean by a generation gap... Well, rather, the reality is closer to a multi-century gap, in which case I suppose it's to be expected. After all, a person from five centuries ago is pretty much like an alien. It's taken five hundred years since my arrival in this world to finally feel a gap between myself and the locals. I really can't help but feel a tinge of embarrassment.

"No, I just realized my life's been so thin and hollow until now... No, I'm very happy. Let's eat together."

At the very least, five hundred years ago this is what I wanted. It's not like I wanted to gather a harem like Saiga, but I did want to develop a relationship with a woman over a long acquaintanceship, become lovers, and eventually eat their cooking. It's taken five hundred years of training, plus another five years of service to a cruel noblewoman, to accomplish that

little fantasy dreamed of by a young man who'd never had a girlfriend. Was the outcome really worth that cost? If I were trying to reassure myself before I started training, what should I tell him?

I'm pretty happy right now, but my past self sincerely wanted this. Whether or not I would have wanted this despite all the effort it's taken is another question entirely. I can't help but shed tears over just how much pity I feel for that young man now.

"A-Alright! Here you go!"

With that, Blois hands me a sandwich. A fluffy sandwich appears from a basket-like thing that's woven out of dry straw. The sensation of soft bread in my hands for the first time in five hundred years. The crusts have been cut off, leaving the bread's texture to stimulate my fingertips. Amazing. Not eating for five hundred years makes the simple act of touching a sandwich send tingles up my spine. Beyond the soft bread, I can also feel the firmness of some sort of leaf. Is that cabbage or lettuce?

"…Sansui, please don't be so moved by the act of just holding a sandwich."

“Oh, sorry…”

Seems my emotions showed on my features, so Blois fusses a bit in response. True, it’s probably a little creepy to see someone deeply moved by simply touching rather than eating a sandwich. But thinking about it, my very first meal in this world is a sandwich prepared by my fiancee. Five hundred years ago, I would’ve reacted with a lot more emotion. No doubt the two of them are expecting that, as well. My salad days, which will never come back, are still enveloping the two of them.

As I grasp just what I’ve given up in exchange for my strength, I open my mouth to eat the sandwich…

“Wait, wait, Miss Blois! You should feed it to him!”

“O-Oh, that’s right!”

Lain proposes something romantic, but I don’t think sandwiches are well suited for that sort of thing. I mean, the sandwich I’m holding is pretty big. I don’t think feeding it to me works unless it’s cut into a bite-sized morsel. But it’s not like it’s completely impossible, so maybe I should avoid ruining that bit of playfulness.

“Alright, then will you feed it to me?”

“O-Ohhh! Yes! Yes! Leave it to me!”

Blois is so much cuter when Lady Douve isn’t around.

As I think that, I hand the sandwich to Blois. Her hands shaking from nerves, Blois takes ragged breaths as she moves the sandwich to my mouth.

“There! That’s it, Miss Blois!”

“Heh, heheh! This is easier than I thought!”

Lain and Blois are both trying hard. They’re enjoying this with all their might. Blois certainly dealt with a lot, but I guess Lain’s had a rough time of it, too. I feel the driver crying up front. I hope he’s still watching where we’re going.

“When I say ‘ahhhn,’ open your mouth, okay? When I say ‘ahhhn’!”

“That’s right, Papa! Make sure you accept Miss Blois’s sandwich!”

They’re both so adorable, my daughter and my fiancee. The me from five hundred years ago would probably look at this and think ‘Five hundred years of work and this is it?’ when compared to Saiga’s harem, but I am very happy. Watching the two, I wipe away my tears and open my mouth.

“I-I can’t… Lain, I’m sorry, but close your eyes!”

“O-Okay!”

“S-Sansui, you close your eyes, too!”

“Ah, alright…”

“No, I have to close my eyes, too…!”

Blois can no longer even muster up the nerve to say ‘ahhn’ and just presses the sandwich against my cheek. What is this? A ‘helping hands’ skit? It’s so old that it feels new. In hindsight, I’m glad it was a sandwich. If it was something like soup, it could’ve ended really badly.

“H-How is it?”

“That’s my cheek.”

“W-Whaaat?! Well, how about here?!”

“No, that’s the other way. That’s under my ear.”

“Ahhh! Ahhhh!”

“You’ve almost got it, Miss Blois!”

Though, since Blois has her eyes closed, can’t I just open mine? It’s one thing for Lain to have her eyes closed, but is there a point for me to keep my eyes closed here? But still... I guess I should play along a bit longer — or so I think.

Part 7 — One Night

“Things can’t stay this way!”

We’re not in some historical drama and have no need to stay inside the carriage, so we’re staying at the various inns located along the main highway. Of course, they’re less inns and more like hotels. Basically, luxurious spots that important people stay at on their journeys.

Thinking about it, Blois is the daughter of a regional lord, while Lain’s the last living member of an imperial house. In that sense, the only one who doesn’t belong here is me. Still, it’s not the first time I’ve stayed at a hotel like this, and since I’m going to become a noble, I think it’s okay.

“I’m going to go for it!”

Of course, in terms of dress code, my attire would normally be completely out of the question. But since this is Sepaeda territory, the Lord of the House made the arrangements, so no one complains about my attire.

Or rather, it seems my name and appearance are pretty famous within the Sepaeda lands. It’s uncomfortable being the center of attention, but I suppose it’s natural for people to take a peek at a swordsman known for massacring a large number of people.

“I readied some particularly risqué underwear for this moment!”

Sepaeda’s ace, the Sword Apostle. He’s on the small side with black eyes and black hair, wearing a kimono and sandals. Part of the reason I maintain this appearance is to advertise that fact.

His Brothership, His Fathership, and Lady Douve all want me to stand out, so they let me dress as I always have. Of course, I have no complaints about that, either.

“Heheh, I’m going to make that cool expression of yours turn beet red! You’re the one who’s going to be flustered tonight!”

“Miss Blois, if you wrap yourself up in that blanket, we can’t see your special underwear.”

So, we’re staying in a pretty nice room, but of course there’s only one bed, even if it’s pretty large. A double bed, maybe king size? It’s big enough for two or three people to sleep on.

“Blois, your shouting is going to inconvenience the other guests. If you can’t come out wearing that, go and put on something else.”

“Sniff… Don’t be so gentle right now…”

Blois, who intended to knock me flat with her special underwear, couldn’t overcome her embarrassment and is instead wrapped up in a blanket. Why is it Blois is so good at filling these sorts of roles? I mean she’d been the rather serious lady knight until now, but she’s ended up like a moe character in a light novel. I feel a certain sentimental nostalgia for the novels I used to read and the heroines that appeared in them, but actually facing this in person is a bit of a problem.

How did this happen? I mean, when we were both guarding Lady Douve, Blois was a superbly skilled swordswoman. I suppose in a way it’s because

she’s trying to cut loose or, rather, that she no longer has to restrain herself.

“I mean, it’s not like you’re super-experienced either, right? I know that well myself. You spent five hundred years in those woods, right? So why…”

“You might yell at me for saying this, but it’s because you’re overreacting to everything. That ends up calming my nerves.”

Even me, a virgin, knows full well what Blois is thinking about. Not being able to sense that wouldn’t be a matter of being dense; at that point, they’re probably not a living thing.

Anyway, Blois wants to be lovey-dovey with me, but her inhibitions keep her from engaging. I suppose that can be chalked up to being young and inexperienced. Of course, it’s not that all young, inexperienced women end up this way.

“I want to be close, to be intimate with you. Which is why I don’t show a lot of anxiety or embarrassment in my actions…”

“That’s cheating…”

Well, what am I supposed to do about that, exactly? If anything, I feel like Blois is just being hypersensitive. I mean, sure, this is practically a honeymoon, but she still seems a little too worked up over it.

“To be a little bit on the harsh side, aren’t you just being a little too anxious? I mean, even if we had a hundred women in a similar situation as you, I bet you’d be the only one who reacted like this.”

“Papa, that’s mean.”

“Well, I can’t help it, you’re just so business as usual that it’s confusing. I mean, it’s your fault for being so one-sided in being nice to me!”

Then what am I supposed to do, exactly? I really can’t think any other way. I mean, even Lain seems to be at a loss. Just how else am I supposed to accommodate her? I guess I should discuss this with Lain.

“Lain, can you come here a moment?”

“Okay, Papa. Time to come up with a game plan!”

We’re probably going about this the wrong way.

“What do we do? I told my friends that I’ll probably get a new brother or sister during this trip!”

“Wait, Lain. Now Papa’s a bit worried about what sort of friends you’ve got. You’re going to tell me their names and ages later.”

“I-I can’t do that! If you get mad, Papa, you’ll chop their heads off! Don’t chop my friends’ heads off!”

I’m worried about the sort of friends Lain is hanging out with, but on reflection, my job is probably a bigger issue. I didn’t even realize Lain was having problems because of my work. True, it’d be scary to have a close friend’s father, even if he was just following orders, be a man who had gone and lopped off a bunch of heads. And, to top it off, Lain knows that the rumors are true.

I ordinarily keep track of her aura, so I don’t think she’s being bullied or anything. And not that I’m in a position to talk, but I’d imagine most people

wouldn’t have the nerve to bully a child who’s the favorite of House Sepaeda’s spoiled princess.

The same goes for me, since in my case, “Your dad’s a murderer!” is actually, “Your dad lopped off hundreds of heads and lined them up for display!” The people around them would probably go out of their way to stop that sort of teasing. After all, the whole class could end up getting executed and gibbeted as mass punishment.

I, after all, embody the whole cliché about how killing a single man makes you a murderer, but killing a hundred makes you a hero. In the end, what I’m doing is still killing people.

“Alright, let’s put that aside for now…”

Getting away from fighting and going on vacation makes me face all of my shortcomings. It’s a good experience, but I need to focus on Blois. I’ve sworn to make her happy, after all. That’s not happening if things stay the way they are.

“I didn’t think Blois was such a pure young maiden. Seems like she’s really excited by the vacation, too.”

“So it’s about having the wrong mood, or the wrong situation…”

I think in this case it’s not that they’re wrong, it’s that it’s all too much for her. I mean, to go straight to a honeymoon with the co-worker she’d admired for years without putting in any of the steps in between… Though, I do think if I could get as worked up as her, my life would be more fun.

“Papa… You should be a lot more aggressive here.”

“How do you come to that conclusion?”

“I mean, Miss Blois really loves you, right? Then it’ll be fine! Just push forward!”

I’m really getting worried about what sort of friends my daughter is hanging out with. It’s an extremely immature way of looking at things. I can’t very well go and stomp all over Blois and her dignity.

“My teacher said that it’s nice to be aggressively wooed by your partner and then wanted by them!”

“I think it’s a little early for that sort of education for you, but… Even so, I can’t do anything while you’re awake, and then it’s a problem on my end…”

Five hundred years ago, I was still a dumb kid, and had aspirations of being like Saiga. It’s not like I’ve forgotten what I’m supposed to do here. I mean, in the five hundred years I spent in the woods, I sensed a lot of animals mating. Though there weren’t any monkeys… No, that’s getting off track.

Anyway, given that there’s a part of me that won’t get up, even if I was aggressive, Lain’s brother or sister won’t come to pass. Besides, there’s no guarantee that Blois would be happy with that.

“If I didn’t have the main character bonus, it’d just be assault, too.”

“…?”

“Anyway, Lain, you should go to bed. Leave Blois to Papa, okay?”

“I bet you’ll have fun tonight!”

“Err, yes. I hope so.”

No doubt Lady Douve would have really enjoyed this, but Lady Douve isn’t here.

But anyway, we put Lain to bed, and Blois and I move to a different room. As befits a classy hotel, there’s a whole suite available.

“Still… Isn’t it hard to breathe like that?”

“…Not really.”

I lighten her with my Feather Step and sit her down on the sofa, and she pops her head out from under the blanket. Since it’s a well-lit room, I can see how red her features are.

“Do you think I’ve disappointed Lain…?”

“I’m not sure about being disappointed, but I think she was surprised. I was caught off guard, too.”

“Yeah… Me, too.”

Dressing up and taking a carriage ride to meet the parents… Have her lover eat her handmade sandwiches and do things like hold hands… Then at the hotel’s luxurious bed, once the kid is asleep, put on sexy lingerie and get worked up… And end up in bed together…

I suppose it’s a sort of cliché. There’s nothing fresh or new about it, but if we’re going to do anything, perhaps that’s the least she wants to be able to do.

“This has been an awful day…”

Blois tears up. I can understand her urge to cry. I mean, it’s not like the journey’s over, either. Even once Blois calms down, she has to keep traveling on the same carriage as Lain and I, who have both witnessed her antics.

“In the end, you’re the same as always… I mean, you’re gentle…and I’m happy, but…”

“I see, I see… It’s my fault. I’m sorry, Blois. You wanted to have a more adult relationship, right?”

Blois sits huddled on the sofa, hugging her knees to her chest. Sitting next to her, I wrap my arm around her shoulder and pull her close. Because of my low height, it doesn’t look all that great, but I’m still able to pull her to me.

“~~~”

“I’ll let go if you want me to… No, that’s not right. I won’t let go, even if you say no.”

“I-I see… Then I guess I have no choice…”

“Yes, it’s my fault, it’s my fault. So let’s just…okay?”

“Y-Yeah… I-If you could be a little more aggressive. Just a little bit more assertive.”

“So picky… Just how much did you dream about this?”

I move my arm from her shoulder down to her hips and pull her even closer. My figure hasn't changed in the last five hundred years, but Blois sure has grown over the last five.

"You've grown up... No, you've become a woman, Blois. A beautiful woman."

"R-Really! I'm...I'm beautiful?"

"It's flattery, of course. In the last five years I've...become a bit more worldly."

I lighten Blois with my Feather Step and change her position. The blanket's come loose and I can see her risqué lingerie. Without giving her an opening to shy away, I pull her close. This is probably what Tahlan would do. Running that simulation in my head lets me be assertive.

As I'm sitting on the sofa, the floating Blois embraces me from the front.

"You've always been handsome. Not flattery... I'm just biased."

Looks like acting like Tahlan's working. Blois, blushing and still weightless, her long hair fluttering, closes her eyes.

I'm not such a boor as to talk about what happened next.

"Papa! Miss Blois! Am I a big sister now?!"

The next morning, an excited Lain peppers Blois with questions. I had figured we'd started over a bit after last night, and after having woken up and dressed in our finery again, but my daughter's just way too curious.

"Is it a brother or a sister?!"

Perhaps because she hasn't met any pregnant women, or because she hasn't actually learned about the process properly, she seems to think that after a baby's created the moment a couple is intimate. I mean, proper knowledge would be a problem in and of itself, so I keep that part vague.

But it seems Blois doesn't want to discuss her memories of last night, and is hiding her flushed face with both hands. In spite of that, Lain keeps pushing. It's probably a little too much to expect of a five year old to read the mood. I mean, she's usually been good at doing that until now.

"Please, Lain..."

"Well, well?! Have you decided on a name?! If it's a girl, can I name her?"

"Um, well..."

"Is it a brother, then?! A boy?!"

Lain keeps pushing. Should I smack her to put a stop to it? Just as I ponder that, a certain possibility comes to mind.

"Hey, Lain, did Lady Douve instruct you to do something?"

"Yup! I'm going to keep a diary of what happens during the trip and report it back to Lady Douve when I get home!"

Hearing those words, I distract myself with the knowledge that Lain knows how to read and write, while Blois begins to contemplate suicide.

Part 8 — Persistence

The Lady Knight, the Wind Magician, Blois. Full name, Blois Wynne.

She was the first to be accepted as a bodyguard by Douve Sepaeda, and is a highly talented mage and swordswoman implicitly trusted by Sansui Shirokuro. She is one of the most skilled combatants in the world, and despite her youth, the previous lord of the martial House Sepaeda regarded her so highly that he made her his daughter's bodyguard.

"All of you. I have received a letter from His Lordship and the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda, so I'd like to inform you of the contents as members of House Wynne."

Her father, Senve Wynne. As regional lord and vassal of House Sepaeda, he, of course, is given all sorts of information from Douve's older brother, the current head of House Sepaeda. Of course, the information is considered classified and can't be disclosed in public, but he had been given permission to share that information with Blois's mother, older sister, older brother, and younger sister.

Those were the values held by House Sepaeda and a standard they always met: they always did right by their retainers. That, of course, included a proper explanation of Blois's fiancé. The disclosure included a tacit apology for approving the engagement without input from her parents, as well as serving as a sign of trust in their discretion.

"Blois, who was serving as Lady Douve's bodyguard, has gotten engaged and will be retiring from her position. Her fiancé is a fellow bodyguard of Lady Douve, a Shirokuro Sansui. They will also be adopting his adopted daughter, Lain."

Or rather, they wouldn't have given the responsibility of managing a territory to a family that couldn't keep its mouth shut.

"No doubt you've all heard, but Shirokuro Sansui is a skilled swordsman, known as House Sepaeda's ace, and is extremely trusted by the Lord Emeritus. With this engagement, His Lordship will be providing an appropriate noble title to him, as well."

In truth, Senve Wynne had reacted rather straightforwardly to the information. Having understood the contents of the news, he was simply extremely happy.

"Further, Sansui is a practitioner of the Immortal Arts, a Rare Art, and as a side-effect of that Art is effectively immortal. While he looks like a young man, he is, in fact, older than the Arcana Kingdom itself."

This was hard to believe. While his wife, who had been informed beforehand, showed no skepticism, his children were understandably a bit leery at hearing the word 'immortal.'

"In addition, Lain, who will become part of our extended family, is the last surviving member of the Domino Empire's imperial house, and her children and grandchildren are slated to marry the offspring of the Domino Republic's supreme leader."

But Blois's parents are completely unbothered by any of this news.

After all, if the Lord and Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda said that this was the truth, then they have no reason to doubt the message's veracity. Even if it had been false, it wouldn't have damaged their house in any way. As a vassal of House Sepaeda, they're encouraged to think that way, and as such, both parents sincerely believed this information, rather than pretending to do so as a courtesy.

"This means our family's future is secure!"

This sentiment was a perfect representation of Senve Wynne as a man. Despite being given information of enormous importance, his conclusion was rather small and minor.

"Yes, such a lovely match. Blois really is such a good daughter."

His wife, Kette Wynne, wholeheartedly backed his sentiments. She, too, could only come to the same conclusions as her husband, and didn't bother to think of the larger ramifications. They considered becoming in-laws with an Immortal or the last of an imperial house to be nothing more than gaining some important people as in-laws.

Of course, that's an extremely important thing to consider for most nobles, but that it was all they could think of in response to the news came as a shock to both their daughters and their son.

"F-Father! Are you certain that's wise?!"

"What do you mean? It's a good match. Hetter, can you secure better terms than this?"

He was shocked that his father didn't see the opportunity to accept the guaranteed last member of Domino's imperial house, a girl guaranteed to become in-laws with the supreme leader of a neighboring country.

In response, the second son and heir, Hetter Wynne yelled at his father, "They're certainly great terms! But Blois is marrying into his family, yes? Then it means that we'll merely be in-laws of the Imperial girl! Can he not marry into our family instead?!"

If the third child of the Wynne Family, Blois Wynne, ends up becoming Shirokuro Blois or Blois Shirokuro or whatever, it'd lessen those all-important connections. Even considering that they're not related by blood, there's a world of difference between her being Lain Wynne or Lain Shirokuro.

"What would you do if that ends up upsetting the other party?!"

Senve's words are, of course, perfectly understandable, and there's really no room for argument. Given that this was decided by House Sepaeda itself, on behalf of House Wynne, a mere vassal offering additional terms would be entirely out of line. But to accept what had been handed down without any attempt at negotiation seemed to Hetter to be the height of incompetence.

"Blois is getting up there in years. If she misses this chance she may not get another one! Besides, the reason House Sepaeda has given us this land

is thanks to Blois's service! To meddle in Blois's match, do you feel no gratitude toward her?!"

"That's true, but..."

"Our current lives are all thanks to Blois's talent and efforts!"

His mother nodded in agreement with those somewhat embarrassing but completely correct words. And in truth, Senve's reaction is probably the one Blois would most welcome. But Hetter, the next heir to House Wynne, believed it was worth the risk of negotiations if it meant further opportunities for House Wynne.

"But Father..."

"Silence! This is a matter that the Lord of House Sepaeda has decided upon, and it is also my decision as head of this House! I will accept no argument against it!"

But the current lord completely rejected Hetter's opinion. While they might get better terms through negotiations, it was also vital to protect their current way of life. That commonness completely rejected Hetter's more ambitious views. Senve's view wasn't actually incorrect, so Hetter couldn't muster a counter-argument.

"At any rate, Blois will be bringing her fiancé and his daughter to visit us. I will accept no disrespect on our family's part!"

Angered by his son's attempt to parlay the good news into a reckless demand, the father stormed out of the room. The mother follows him, leaving only the children.

"Silly brother. You knew Father and Mother would get angry at that sort of suggestion," the youngest daughter, Lyra Wynne, says, chuckling at her brother. Her parents were certainly being simple-minded, but she also found her brother's foolishness in calling out that simple-mindedness to be amusing.

"Quiet, Lyra! It's something that needs to be said! It's not like anything can be done about it once I've inherited the House!"

"Silly brother. You know full well what would happen if our poor father were to get greedy and try to get more after the lords of House Sepaeda have already rendered their judgment."

It was true that even Lyra found her parents' nonchalance to be a bit exasperating. But, at the same time, she didn't consider the decision to fully back House Sepaeda's decision to be the wrong one. True, her parents were reacting like simpletons, but that was the right reaction for simpletons to take. Frankly, it was the right way to think, given their talents and position. Perhaps believing everything with conviction might be questionable, but as ways of navigating the world go, it wasn't a bad one.

"Dammit... If I could've become the head of the house just a year or two earlier..."

"You really are foolish, Brother. From the perspective of the heads of the Four Great Houses, there's little difference between you and Father."

Lyra's words are also correct. Even if Hetter went from merely the heir to House Wynne to the head of House Wynne, House Sepaeda would still prefer the wishes of Blois over him. Blois had served them loyally and ably as Douve's bodyguard. No one cared about the parochial interests of House Wynne.

"Besides, given that you can't even convince Father, there's no way you could stand up to Lord Sepaeda."

"…!"

Lyra has her doubts, as well, but it had already been decided. Well aware that she had no say in the matter, Lyra searched for the best route available to her under the circumstances. Arguments and fighting were things dumb for men to do. If anything, their father was smarter on this front.

Get on good terms with Blois's fiancé, make connections and marry into a better family than House Wynne… That was her current goal. Anything beyond that, she could think about once she got to know her sister and her husband-to-be.

"Still, I've never actually met Blois. I don't know anything about someone who left home over five years ago... Chette, perhaps you know something about her? Perhaps you can tell me?" Lyra asked her eldest sibling, Chette Wynne.

At the time of Blois's departure, Lyra was only about four years old. She didn't know a thing about her talented older sister, and no doubt the others didn't know much about her, either. Of course, she'd probably changed over the years, but if she could hear some old anecdotes, then at least it'd be an interesting subject of conversation.

"…Chette?"

"What's wrong, Sister?"

Blois's brother and sister saw that their eldest sibling hadn't moved. She had already married and had several children, but she was stuck on processing a surprising revelation.

"The Sword Apostle is a Rare Art user…and immortal?"

Chette, Hetter, Blois, Lyra… Each had some sort of talent, and Lord Sepaeda was aware of that fact. Each of those talents was something that their parents lacked, which is why they were called kites that had birthed hawks.

But, their appearances were all inherited. That is, all of them have the beautiful noble features of their mother.

However... Like their aging mother, whose looks have faded with the years, Chette also has started to feel the effects of age on her looks…

"That…child…has been alive for hundreds of years?!"

This bears noting, even if it's been something that should have said a long time ago. The reason Sansui Shirokuro never revealed his actual age was partly because no one would believe him, but also partly because if people *did* believe him it would cause an enormous fuss.

“Just how…”

Eternal youth, eternal life. It’s an enduring desire for humans. The fact that Sansui, a young man who looked like he was still in his growing years, has looked the same for five years…it was more than enough to lend credence to the idea that he was immortal.

“Oh dear, Chette might very well do something foolish. Brother, wouldn’t it be a good idea to send a note to her husband?”

“…Yes. Let’s have him pick her up right away.”

If anything, it had taken a surprisingly long time for this problem to occur.

“The secret to regaining youth. If I can just learn that…”

Part 9 — Gaze

“So these are your family’s lands. They look pretty prosperous.”

“Yeah~~. Though maybe not as much as the capital or Sepaeda itself.”

“Yes. They gave us nice lands, after all.”

It was a leisurely carriage trip, but since we were staying in-country, it didn’t take as long as expected. The three of us are moving along town with an escort. The view outside the carriage and the auras around us feel pretty normal. Lain seems to agree.

“Still, we seem to be gathering quite a bit of attention. Is there something that stands out? It’s not like Lady Douve’s with us.”

“Of course. This carriage has the seal of House Sepaeda on it. It’s probably an unusual sight here.”

Ah, I see, that makes sense. Until now I always thought that the attention paid to the carriage was because of Lady Douve. But the reality was that the carriage was the thing that was actually gathering attention. It didn’t matter who was riding it; if House Sepaeda’s carriage is being escorted, no doubt it draws attention.

“Still, um, well… Introducing you to my parents still is going to take some nerve.”

“Well, yes, I’m sure… But don’t be so tense. It’s not like you have a bad relationship with your parents, right?”

With that, I reach over and Blois’s hand. As I gently squeeze her fingers to reassure her, Blois turns away but accepts my touch. Meanwhile, Lain watches the exchange with a lively gaze. This’ll probably be reported to Lady Douve, but I’ll consider it a good thing, since both of them are happy.

“Y-You’re right… I’m sure my parents will celebrate our engagement.”

“Pardon, but we’re about to arrive at the estate,” the driver tells us.

True, I start sensing fewer people around us. And then the carriage begins approaching auras that are clearly welcoming us and watching for our arrival.

“…Wow. Your father and mother have really simple auras.”

I can even see their reactions in my mind before I lay eyes on them. Despite the fact that a princess from a fallen empire and a five hundred year old hermit are going to be their in-laws, there’s nothing complicated about their reaction.

“Welcome, Master Sansui! Thank you for coming to our estate!”

“Welcome home, Blois! It’s lovely to see you!”

As we get off the carriage, we’re welcomed by a couple that looked exactly as you would expect Blois’s parents to look. There’s not a hint of unnaturalness, like you would see if you were told Lain was my daughter. At the same time, at their remarkable nonchalance, I feel a certain discomfort but also relief that I don’t have to deal with certain complications.

I mean to be so thoroughly welcomed is a bit scary in itself, but I don’t really have a precise answer if asked how I would like to be greeted instead.

Rather than think about my own reaction, I decide to celebrate the fact that they're happy to see us. I'm sure Blois would prefer that her parents celebrate her engagement, too.

"Now please, come with us."

With a warm welcome, we're then taken into the estate. It's only natural, but the servants are all extremely nervous. It didn't seem like the sort of anxiety they'd feel over the arrival of a daughter of the house and her fiancé. The butler and the maids all have tense expressions, and while they're maintaining their smiles, they also seem to be sweating bullets.

No doubt the parents have told them to avoid offending Lain and I. It's a pretty obvious reaction, but there's nothing really wrong about it. They'll just have to accept it as part of their duties. That's what it means to welcome important personages and what it means to work at an estate that welcomes important personages.

"First, I thought we'd start the day by celebrating the engagement, so I've gathered the entire family, including my one married daughter. A gathering just for family."

"Don't worry, Blois, everyone's happy to hear of your engagement."

Of course. As Blois has said repeatedly, there's nothing to fault with this engagement. In the future they'll be able to brag to other nobles that they're in-laws of the supreme leader of the neighboring country. Even if they're not related by blood, it's still true. Even if no one celebrates it, they'll still be viewed with envy and jealousy.

"Tomorrow, there'll be a bit more of a hassle. I'm afraid I must ask that you accept it as part of our family obligations."

"We'll be holding a large party with the local noble families. I know you haven't spent much time at society functions and that it may be a bit uncomfortable, but please try to bear it."

The two seem to have sensed I don't really enjoy such parties. It's true that I don't enjoy them, but it's just a matter of dealing with it for a short time. It's not like I have that much of an aversion to the trappings of the mortal world.

At the very least, it's a lot more peaceful than the orders I get from House Sepaeda about chopping off heads and putting them on display. It's perhaps a little vulgar, but it's not malicious. They just want to show off a bit. It's much more reserved than what Lady Douve got me used to, and I'm not that averse to playing along.

No, I'm thinking about this the wrong way, as though I'm above or apart from them. I'm still not all I ought to be.

"You really are a thoughtful daughter, Blois."

"Indeed, everything is going swimmingly, thanks to you. We really do appreciate everything you've done."

The important thing is that the relationship between Blois and her parents is a good one.

"Um, a pleasure to meet you!"

“Ah, so you’re Lain. I’m Blois’s father. You can consider me your grandpa from now on.”

“And please think of me as your grandma from now on.”

It means they’re happy to accept Lain as part of the family. It’s much better than if they were weirdly capable and had some sort of ambition for her. I’m not all that good at pretending, either, so this is worth celebrating. It’s good for everyone.

“I’m sure it might be a short stay, but thank you for having us, Father, Mother.”

Blois’s parents are reaching out to us in friendship. It’s only proper that we respond in kind.

“…Haha! Then, if you’ll come this way!”

“Yes, everyone’s looking forward to welcoming our new family members!”

Seeing my attitude, they seem sincerely reassured. In truth, my reaction is probably what they were hoping for. The two of them lead us through the estate, their steps light.

“Hey, Papa. Miss Blois’s mama and papa are really nice.”

“Yes, they are.”

Even seeing my appearance, they didn’t show any intolerance or distaste. Part of it is probably because I’m pretty famous by now, but they probably wouldn’t have had any sense of revulsion even if it wasn’t. I try not to think about the possibility that they simply don’t notice it because they’re too caught up in the potential advantages.

“Phew…”

Blois herself is extremely relieved. That’s understandable, since she couldn’t know how they’d react until she actually saw them. We’re all putting on a friendly face and acting in accordance with the whims of people far higher up than us, but even then there’s always the possibility of an unexpected development. Even if she said she was fine, no doubt there was a part of her that was anxious.

“Now, may I present our family?”

“We would have liked to invite the grandchildren as well, but for today it’s just our daughters and our son. Of course, Lain is the exception.”

Things have proceeded so smoothly that it’s almost anticlimactic, which is why I’m caught off guard by the woman’s intense gaze. Everyone in the room other than Blois’s parents turned their attention to that woman. The man who appears to be Blois’s older brother, the young girl that seems to be Blois’s little sister, Blois herself, even Lain, and of course, my own eyes…are all fixed on that woman.

“…”

I feel an intensity in her gaze. She stares at me so fervently that I’m almost sure she could kill me with that look. Just her eyes are intently focused on me, while she shows no other expression and says nothing.

“Then allow me to introduce them in turn. This is our eldest, Chette.”

“She’s married and is such a dutiful daughter that she’s even given us several grandchildren.”

“…”

The parents are the only ones who don’t notice the mood, and proudly introduce Chette, who stares silently at me. Just looking at her face or, rather, if you ignored her gaze, she’s a beautiful noblewoman, but she stares at me with bloodshot eyes.

“A pleasure to meet you, Lady Chette. I am Sansui Shirokuro and this is my daughter Lain. I’m extremely happy to have the fortune of being engaged to marry the daughter of such a notable house.”

I steel myself and step forward, bowing and introducing myself. Seeing my actions, everyone’s quite impressed. Well, other than her parents.

Looking at me, Blois’s older sister…

“…!”

For some reason, she takes off her lace gloves and touches my cheeks with her bare hands. It’s clearly not something a noblewoman should be doing. And her gaze grows more intent, as though surprised by what she felt from her touch. Somehow there’s even more intensity behind her stare.

“Five hundred years old… Five hundred years… This skin…?!”

Oh, wait, is this…? Yeah, it’s a bit late to consider this, but is she in shock at the fact that I’m immortal? I mean sure, I have smooth, moist skin, but surely this is a bit over the top?

“Hey, that’s not fair! Chette’s getting all the attention! Please introduce me as well, Father, Mother!” Blois’s little sister, as though to change the strange mood, hugs me. In contrast to her childish actions, her expression is extremely tense. No doubt she’s trying really hard to forestall any problems.

“Haha! Now, now, that’s hardly the way to behave, Lyra! Master Sansui seems at a loss.”

While a little less natural than his sister, the brother also addresses me in the same fashion. He tries to put on a debonair air and offers his hand for a shake.

“I’m Hetter, Blois’s elder brother. The slightly unmannerly young girl is my sister Lyra. No doubt she’s excited at meeting such a famous warrior. Please forgive her.”

“Not at all. I’m flattered.”

I naturally get away from Blois’s big sister and shake her brother’s hand. I try to relax my features, but Hetter and I both remain tense.

“…Such smooth skin, like a baby’s…”

I’m on the receiving end of an envy that I’ve never felt before, and I try desperately to change the subject. I avoid making eye contact with Lady Chette as she mutters to herself.

“I hear that you met with the supreme leader of the Domino Republic when you were in the Caputo Lands. If you don’t mind, could you tell me a little about him?”

“Oh, that’s not fair, Brother! I want to hear stories, too!”

We put together a little skit to try to make it through.

Looking at the three of us…

“Now, now, don’t pester him too much.”

“Yes, no doubt he’s tired after a long journey.”

Blois’s parents, who go far beyond not being able to read a room to just completely lacking situational awareness entirely, gently chide Hetter and Lyra. No, that’s not it. The one that’s causing me problems is Lady Chette! Please notice. If possible, let us leave the room. Honestly, her gaze is really scary.

“Chette…?”

“Young, nubile skin…”

Blois is at a loss at just how different her sister is from her memories, while Lain clings to Blois, holding back tears. Yes, that’s right. There’s just something scary about her!

“I’m sure it pales compared to House Sepaeda, but we put together a welcome banquet of our own.”

“If there’s anything missing, do let us know.”

Trying to build a more peaceful atmosphere, we move to the dinner banquet. Of course, a dinner banquet means food. House Sepaeda trained me in basic table manners, and I’ve certainly pretended to eat in the past. I also actually ate on the journey here, and it’s not as though I’ve never used a spoon or a fork, so I was managing just fine.

“…”

However, Lady Chette’s gaze was a much bigger problem than anything to do with table manners. Everyone other than the parents were afraid of the oldest daughter.

“A-Ahem! Master Sansui, I hear that you and Blois have met Domino’s new ruler, Fuushi Ukyou?”

“Yes, though it was a very brief meeting.”

“It was the same for me. In the end we’re only bodyguards… I believe the people of House Batterabbe spent a fair amount of time with him, though.”

As Hetter tries to make conversation, I jump in. No doubt the Domino Republic is a subject of some interest. I decided to drop a story I heard from Tahlan, who had served as Ukyou’s bodyguard.

“I serve as an instructor for the prince of the Magyan Kingdom and for the heir to House Batterabbe, and I’ve heard a few stories about Lord Ukyou from them.”

“Ohh? What sort of man is he?”

“Evidently he is a man full of a sense of duty, worthy of shouldering the burden of a country. Someone who will do anything it takes to survive for his people.”

Of course, evidently that’s actually a prerequisite required to wield the Holy Chalice, Elixir. At the very least, I don’t have that sort of strong will myself. Further, I don’t have the chops to want to shoulder something as large a country. In that sense, he’s a much stronger man than me.

“Considering that he’s a man who brought down an entire country, I’ve heard he’s quite an intense person.”

“I see… I hear he’s extremely young?”

“A little older than Blois, I believe. As a ruler… He’s very young.”

“…I see. That young.”

No doubt he’s actually interested in the subject and not just asking to change the conversation. He is, after all, one who regards himself as the lord and master of an entire nation. Unlike the Arcana Kingdom, he’s pretty much a dictator, and to a noble lord’s heir, he’s probably something of an idol.

“According to Lord Sepaeda, Lord Ukyou is a man who combines the decisiveness to know when to go to war and the strength of character to know when to withdraw. Moreover, he’s a man who would willingly face down death for the sake of peace.”

“…I see, so that’s according to His Lordship.”

Of course, depending on how you look at it, you could say he's a coward who started a war then bowed his head in apology when it looked like he was going to lose. Still, when facing a mage who functions like a bomber, he really didn't have any other choice. It was a wise decision.

"So Master Sansui and Blois are acquaintances with foreign princes? That subject is of more interest to me!"

Lyra works to keep the conversation from lapsing. For my part, I know more about Tahlan than Ukyou, so I try to change the subject in that direction…

"Mister Sansui…"

I'm cut off as Lady Chette opens her mouth. Her presence is such that it silences any dissent and she cuts right through everyone else.

"Pardon my inquisitiveness, but I am told you're an immortal who has lived for five hundred years?"

"Y-Yes…"

"I have seen you before. Since I only saw you from afar, no doubt you didn't notice me, but it was when you first took on the role of Lady Douve's bodyguard."

There's quite a bit of evidence that's necessary to believe I'm five hundred years old. No doubt, from the parents' point of view, it doesn't matter if it's true or not.

But having seen me in the past, it's a huge issue for Lady Chette. After all, I look like a child. If it's been four to five years, then normally I should look a lot different, like Lain and Blois do. The people I'm with, like Lady Douve, don't seem to have really noticed because I was always with them, but having heard I'm five hundred years old, it seems there's something that's bothering her.

"I had heard there was a child who protected Lady Douve along with my sister… I never imagined it would have been someone who was five hundred years old."

"Haha! Indeed, so unexpected!"

"If anything, I'd love to hear how you stay so young."

The parents, who still think we're having some peaceful banter, have an almost frightening level of purity. While her mother is asking the secret to my youth as a joke, Lady Chette's watching my every move with a glare that could kill.

"As for how… We Immortals are Rare Arts users who wield ki. The reason our growth and aging stops is part of the process of learning the Immortal Arts. It's not a specific skill or technique."

My own memories from five hundred years ago are pretty hazy, but I've never put any effort into not aging. If I had to describe it, it's that I naturally wound up this way as I put in my training for my Immortal Arts and my swordsmanship. Obviously immortality itself isn't exactly natural.

“If you possess ki rather than mana, as you spend time in deep woods or high mountains far away from society, you eventually become one with nature and are freed from the shackles of time.”

It sounds odd as I’m saying it, but this sounds like the teachings of some weird cult. But since it’s the truth, I can’t help it.

“It’s not convincing as I say this while eating this delicious meal, but by cutting off all my connections with people and not eating or drinking, even once I’ve come down from the mountain or left the woods, time appears to remain stopped for me.”

“Ah ha, so it’s not that you can use a technique that makes you younger?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Hetter tries to come to a conclusion, and I jump right on. That’s right. I have no power to make others younger. While my master might be able to wield that sort of power, I haven’t learned it. Further, even if I were to learn it, I’m sure it’d take an enormous amount of time to master. At the very least, I won’t be able to learn it while she’s still alive. Further, Immortals don’t age, so there’s no real need to actually learn a technique that restores youth or makes people younger.

“Oh, a pity.”

“Now, now, you’re still plenty beautiful! If anything, you’re more alluring than you were when you were young!”

“Oh, dear, not in front of the children.”

Compared to how happy the parents are, Lady Chette continues to glare daggers at me. Lain looks like she’s about to pee herself.

“Lain, are you not feeling well?”

I then come up with a brilliant idea. If Lain’s not feeling well, then we can end this banquet.

“Um, no, I’m okay, Papa…”

“No, no, you look pale as a sheet. It looks like she’s tired from the long journey. I’m afraid I’m going to have to go put my daughter to bed…”

Everyone other than Lady Chette nods at my proposal. It’s true that Lain’s not feeling well, so no one’s going to fault me for putting an end to this banquet.

“Yes, go take care of that.”

“Oh dear! Poor thing.”

The parents, who are just treating us with ordinary care, react normally. I mean, our engagement’s already settled. If they take any moves to hurry things along here, all it’ll do is buy unnecessary hostility. Of course they’ll be worried about Lain’s health. If anything happened, I’d hate it, but it’d be a matter of life or death for this family.

“Father! We should call for a mystic, just in case!”

“I agree, Father! We shouldn’t risk her health over dinner! I guess that’s the end of the banquet!”

Everyone’s hearts came together as one and the banquet came to an end.

Thank you, Lain. You’re such a good daughter. Also… Sorry about that.

Part 10 — Sisters

“Hey, Blois. Your sister seems a little bit mentally unstable, doesn’t she?”

After a mystic came to check up on Lain, we got a diagnosis of stress and put her to bed. Blois and I are now in the guest room talking.

Frankly, that fixation of hers is ridiculous. Immortality must be extremely attractive to women of a certain age, but surely there are limits. Her obsession was off the charts.

“It’s odd… Chette didn’t used to be like that…”

“Well, but that was over five years ago, right? I’m sure your memories are also a little whitewashed. And five years is enough time for there to be changes…”

Of course, I feel a bit sad saying this. But in that case, whatever else I said to Blois would be hollow.

“I think she’s probably worried about her skin… But I’m pretty sure that’s all due to her lifestyle. If she improves that, I’m sure her skin will get healthier.”

“Specifically?”

“Get enough rest regularly. Balanced nutrition. Get enough exercise. Don’t eat too much meat, don’t drink too much, get plenty of vegetables… Also, less stress.”

Humans don’t get better just by taking, applying, or injecting medicine. More important than any sort of medication, it’s lifestyle choices that show up in health. As such, unhealthy lifestyles are akin to a lack of training. Of course, I’m aware that my advice is easier said than done.

“I’m sure that’s impossible as a noble.”

“Yeah, I agree. In which case, she needs to come to terms with it.”

I mean, really, it might be easier to just find a Rare Art for that. I wonder if such a Rare Art, one that manages a person’s health, actually exists. If there is, no doubt it’d be extremely valuable.

“I mean, it’s not that I don’t understand your sister’s feelings…but it just seems a little extreme.”

“Yeah. Why is she…?”

She might very well be making things worse by abducting virgins from the peasantry and bathing in their blood. That’s the sort of intensity I was getting from her. This was the first time anyone’s reacted that strongly to my immortality in this world.

“She’s married, right? Are things not going well with her husband?”

“Could be… I’ll check, but I don’t want to see Chette like that.”

“But that’s enough from us for now. Why don’t we hear from her as well? Come on in,” I call over to Blois’s younger sister hiding behind the door. Seems like she’s here to provide us some information.

“…Wow, you found me so easily. Guess the kingdom’s greatest swordsman can see right through my hiding.”

Blois's little sister looks quite young. She's older than Lain, of course, but she's still much younger than I look. Despite that, her expressions have a playfulness and intelligence beyond her years. That she's making a point of showing her intelligence is also clear.

"I came to give you two a little warning, Blois, Sansui. I'd prefer if you'd avoid interacting with Hetter and Chette."

She clearly has something that's bothering her in that regard. Well, honestly, it's true that I'd rather not get involved if I could avoid it. But while I understand about Lady Chette, I'm a bit confused about Hetter.

"Because both of them hate you, Blois," her little sister supplies.

The youngest sister's statement was rather intense. At the very least, it came as a shock to Blois. It comes as a surprise to even me. But there doesn't seem to be anything behind Lyra's words. At the very least, she's not lying.

"Having been away for so long, I'm sure you're not aware of the dynamics. Well, of course, Father and Mother also aren't aware of them, either."

"B-But why?! Didn't we get these lands because I was working as Lady Douve's bodyguard?! Why would they hate me?!"

"That's why. That's why they hate you, Blois."

I didn't understand the logic. At the very least, I don't know why they'd hate her when they haven't even seen her in so long.

"I'm told that Chette has always been extremely beautiful and the center of attention at society gatherings. Not only was she beautiful, but she had an elegance to her manners, which is why she was able to marry so well. Hetter was always very smart, and I'm told he was looked at as a promising heir to the family. This isn't from a family point of view, but Lord Sepaeda's view, so I'm sure that's probably a trustworthy opinion."

While Blois and I only know how to fight, we both know that Lyra is a lot wiser than her years would otherwise indicate.

"And Blois, well, you're a supremely talented swordswoman and mage. Because of that talent, you became the bodyguard to House Sepaeda's only daughter. It just so happened that the noble in charge of this territory was brought up on charges of serious corruption, which is why House Wynne was given a step up to this territory. Do you know what that meant for Hetter and Chette?"

"They didn't celebrate?"

"We celebrated. At least, I did, as did Mother and Father. I mean, ever since I can remember, I've been helped by the fruits of your sacrifice, and do you really think Father and Mother have anything like secret ambitions or anything? It's just that Hetter and Chette twisted themselves into odd knots."

Lyra continues to recount what happened to the beautiful eldest daughter and the smart son.

“It goes without saying, but Chette’s husband was the best she could hope for based on House Wynne’s standing at the time she got married. Obviously, no matter how beautiful she was, there was a limit to how high up she could marry. And Blois, your talents bore fruit after Chette had already given birth.”

At that, I finally understood. It seems Blois understood as well. But surely that’s just misplaced anger.

“Yes, thanks to Blois, our House rose in stature. Meaning that, relatively speaking, Chette’s husband’s House lost standing. Of course, that means that Chette gained some authority within that House, and no doubt they appreciated her all the more. But Chette didn’t feel that way. She felt that if House Wynne had risen faster...she could have...”

“But...”

“This is her throwing a tantrum, so don’t let it bother you. Anyway, Chette’s recently feeling the effects of age on her skin, so she’s worried she’s going to lose the only thing that sets her apart from everyone else. No matter how beautiful she is, she can’t stand up against newer, younger women as the center of the society scene. It’s hard for her, given that she wants to be the center of attention all the time.”

She sounded exasperated. The youngest of the daughters is clearly thoroughly disgusted with her eldest sister.

“Beautiful, elegant... A woman anyone would kill to have by their side. Sure, that’s valuable, but it’s also temporary. A flower’s life is short. Isn’t that true, Sansui?”

“I won’t deny it, but people aren’t flowers. They’re a different thing entirely.”

“That might be. But, well, don’t you think that her panic is misplaced? She’s long past the stage of her life where all that matters is for her and her alone to be beautiful. What she should be doing now acting as a mother to raise her children. She doesn’t understand that, and clings to her past glory instead. It’d be funny if it wasn’t so sad.”

It’s close to a form of self-hatred. The youngest daughter had nothing but contempt for her eldest sister as a woman, and she was embarrassed that they were related. Perhaps she mocks her because that’s the only way she can cope with that reality. She’s struggling with it, as well.

“Then what about Hetter? Why does he hate me?”

“That’s even simpler. Hetter intended to improve our lands once he inherited them from a less than average father. He probably does have the talent to make that possible. But that problem was solved in a way that didn’t involve him or his efforts at all.”

To be given a prosperous territory due to his younger sister’s work... Hetter couldn’t stand knowing that.

“Being treated like a child, he was never allowed to take part in governing the old territory even as the heir. But Blois, you were even younger, but you managed to get our family a better territory. Thanks to

you, our family's life got much better overnight. And then the peasants of this territory, because he replaced a greedy, corrupt lord, welcomed our less than average, but clean and fair Father with open arms. Don't you think that'd result in him developing an inferiority complex about you, his younger sister?"

It's understandable, but it's not something that one can accept. It's completely unjustified resentment.

The revelation really hurt Blois. She had thought her family was happy because their lives had gotten better thanks to her work, but they had taken the fruits of her work, then hated her for it.

"Hetter's in a panic. His younger sister's one of the most skilled warriors in this kingdom, receiving high honors and rank, and is about to retire from that. Meanwhile, he's still stuck as the heir to the territory. No doubt because he's so smart, it's harder for him to bear."

It's not that they hold anything against her, or that they're mad at her.

They just don't like her.

"I'll put it out there, but whatever Hetter decides to do, this territory has a bright future. Just running it normally brings in enough tax revenue. Though, Hetter evidently has problems with Father's governance."

Unlike Chette, there was something pitiable about Hetter. No one's done anything wrong, but he's still suffering.

"But even if Hetter takes over the reins, it won't change that much. The conditions are good here, so success is expected. No matter how hard he tries, he won't get any credit for it. His life will just be about that, and there's nothing beyond that for him to accomplish. Hetter will die as a regional lord without leaving his mark on the world."

With that she turns and looks at me.

"Unlike you, Sansui."

"You say that, but…"

"I'm sure it doesn't seem like such a big deal for you, who'll still be around even as you become a rumor or a legend and all of the people telling your tales die out."

As a simple truth, my master was known as the ultimate swordsman two thousand years ago. But the only ones who still remember that fact were the people of Tempera Village. Leaving my name in this country's history isn't a big deal from my point of view. Even once this country is gone and everyone forgets about me, I'll probably still be training with my master.

"But this is a matter of life and death for Hetter. His younger sister, Blois, has carved out a place for herself in the world with her own talents, which is why he thinks he needs to accomplish something beyond that."

That's a harsh reality.

"Hetter is the only son, so he'll be able to inherit the House without any problems, and as such, he can't leave this territory. If he had even one older brother, then he could have gone and made a name for himself with the Royal House or with House Sepaeda."

What would Saiga or Shouzo think if they were here? What would they think, having made their names, at the very least in this era, and now being considered aces that take on vital missions for the kingdom?

But that has nothing to do with Blois.

“That’s enough for now.”

I stop Lyra.

“I understand their feelings, but if they’re going to keep hurting Blois with their misplaced resentment, then I won’t hesitate to step in, even if they are her brother and sister. And you…I know you’re her little sister, but…you should show some concern as well.”

“My, my, I’m jealous. Blois, no doubt your name will go down in this kingdom’s history. The partner of House Sepaeda’s ace. As a woman, I’m completely jealous.”

She’s both oddly obstinate yet refreshingly honest. It seems like she really did come here to try to help, in her own way.

“Hetter’s a pretty logical thinker, and he hasn’t fallen so far as to take it out on someone who doesn’t deserve it. He hasn’t seen far enough along to his own end, and he’s still got hopes for the future. He’ll just hit you with his competitiveness, to try to show everyone that he can do better, even though he can’t. But the problem… Well, it goes without saying, but it’s Chette. Frankly, she’s too much for me to handle.”

I agree wholeheartedly.

“I’ll ask just in case, but there really isn’t magic that makes you younger?”

“There might be, but I can’t use it.”

“I see… Well, if there was, that’d be a problem, so probably better to keep it that way. I mean, it feels like it’d end up being even worse if you did.”

This girl is even more unnatural in her mannerisms compared to her appearance than I am. Could she actually be a reincarnation of someone? Could it be that it’s not a little girl inside her but someone else? That, or she’s actually an old woman who’s regained her youth?

“But, wait, is Chette really the first one to corner you about this?”

“Yeah. Chette’s the first one. I think… Most of the people around Sansui just don’t care about youth or eternal life. Both His Lordship and the Lord Emeritus both knew Sansui himself well before they knew about his immortality. In a sense, they have a certain amount of respect for him. And then there’s the Regent, who’s already accepted her age…”

“I see… I’m jealous. You all constantly interact with people at the top, it seems,” Lyra says, then laughs self-deprecatingly.

True, about the only people I’ve interacted with who weren’t at the top were those émigré nobles, Nuri and Hari. All the rest were people who were in the top echelons of this kingdom, all with the talent and skill worthy of being there. And none of them had the sort of complexes that Lyra’s been

dealing with. Of course, there must be frustrations and concerns that those at the top deal with in their own ways.

“Anyway... For Chette, both Hetter and I will keep an eye out for her. I think it’s best not to see her without Father or Mother with you. Honestly, she’s...worse than usual.”

Yeah, she’s like something out of a horror movie. I mean, I can hardly talk as an Immortal, but she’s the first monster I’ve met in this world. She could be the star of that movie without any special makeup or effects. That’s just how intense her gaze was.

If I ran into those eyes in the dead of the night, I might very well kill her out of terror. Of course, that’s not something that could actually happen, considering the amount of training I’ve done, but if Ran saw those eyes, I’m sure she’d react by punching her. And in that case, I really couldn’t blame her.

“For now, Chette’s husband will be coming by tomorrow, so let’s push everything onto him. Until then, try not to leave this room... Oh, and I wanted to say,” Blois’s precocious sister added with an almost envious look.

“Blois, thank you for all of the work you do. It’s thanks to you that I’m able to live such a nice life. Is it hard serving Lady Douve?”

“...Yes. It’s very hard. But Father and Mother...and you, as well...you’re all happy as a result. That’s why I bore it until now.”

“I see...so it really is hard. Thank you. I really do appreciate everything you’ve done. And, what about the Sword Apostle, Shirokuro Sansui? Are you happy you’re engaged to him?”

“...Yes, I’m happy.”

“Ah, I’m jealous... Congratulations. Make sure you find happiness, Blois.”

With the gentle sibling exchange that Blois had been seeking done, Lyra left the room, as though apologizing for the family’s reaction to all of Blois’s sacrifices.

Part 11 — Farce

“Well, well, you’re as young as the rumors say.”

“Yes, I envy you.”

“My, Miss Blois is quite beautiful as well. She’s usually quite dignified, but today she’s also very lovely.”

“You’ve gone from your ordinary role standing beside Lady Douve to being a gentlewoman protected by your husband, I see.”

“Still, this means House Wynne’s future is quite secure. Oh, how I envy you.”

“Ah, you flatter us…”

“We would like to maintain cordial relations with your family…”

And so conversations that sound like they have meaning but have no actual content fill the party hall. A large number of guests have gathered here to try to curry favor with Blois’s parents while lavishing praise on both Blois and I. Lady Douve had typically been the recipient of that flattery until now, so I have to admit, I found it uncomfortable to be the target.

“…Hey, Sansui, just how many of the people here are actually celebrating our engagement?”

“Blois, that’s a rabbit hole you don’t want to go down. But, well… Your parents, the guests, they’re all happy. That I can guarantee.”

“I see… Yes, I suppose that makes sense.”

Blois, dressed like a princess, is a bit on guard. No doubt the fact that her older sister and older brother, who should be celebrating her engagement, has her on edge. Still, I do my best to reassure her.

“Your parents seem quite proud of you.”

“True…”

“Miss Blois, you’re very beautiful!”

“I see… You’re such a sweet girl, Lain.”

This may not be the best way to phrase it, but one shouldn’t be worrying about whether or not the people around you are genuinely celebrating your happiness. You need to think about it with the roles reversed. Can you sincerely celebrate the marriage of a relative you see only on rare occasions if they invite you to their wedding reception? It’s wrong to expect others to do something you’re not capable of doing yourself. They’ve taken time out of their busy lives to come and at least go through the motions of celebrating. One shouldn’t expect more than that.

I mean, given that we’re not Lady Douve, do we really want other people being jealous or envious of us? Personally, I’d rather not be involved at all. After all, an Immortal really shouldn’t be going out into high society, anyway.

“Just accept the praise and move on. I think it’s okay to do that at this sort of occasion.”

“I suppose… I see that you’re dressed the same even at your own engagement party…”

“Nothing that can be done about that, I’m afraid.”

I’m still in my rough kimono woven from fine fabric. This is what I’m most comfortable in, and I can’t very well wear anything else at this point, but my mode of dress is completely at odds with the general atmosphere. Of course, from a different point of view, it means I stand out from the crowd. This is essentially another part of playing a role. I’m still under Lady Douve’s orders to dress this way.

“It’s not worth worrying about. I’m sure for our wedding I’ll be allowed to wear something other than this casual kimono, so let’s just bear with it for now. I think we can be forgiven for being excited and basking in a sense of superiority on an occasion like this.”

Usually, Blois is under constant strain, what with being worked to the bone. Surely she’s earned the right to be a little ostentatious at a party like this. We can leave playing host to her parents, and just soak up the praise and attention.

“Ah, so you’re the famous Sword Apostle. Your exploits are well-known even here.”

Just as I think that, I end up being the center of attention. I feel a certain number of envious gazes from off in the distance, but it shouldn’t be too much of a problem if I stay polite and approachable. Besides, it’s an event where I can’t help but be the target of some jealousy.

“That’s all due to the generosity of His Lordship, the Lord Emeritus, and Lady Douve. I have nothing but gratitude for the three of them.”

“No, no. Surely there are many who have unjustified complaints and discontent with those of the main branch of House Sepaeda. You and Miss Blois defended Lady Douve from all that hostility with just the two of you. No one can doubt your skill.”

There were plenty of times where Lady Douve willingly courted trouble, so in that sense, the number of actual attacks that stemmed from resentment was surprisingly small. But it’s not worth going into that, so I stay silent.

“You are now not simply the pride of House Sepaeda, but of the kingdom itself. I should like to hear tales of your exploits.”

“Yes, that’s right. The tale of how you lined up the heads of the enemy in the capital is perhaps a bit graphic, but…”

“I should certainly like to hear your tales. Anecdotes from the man known as the kingdom’s greatest swordsman…that’s an opportunity that doesn’t come often.”

And so people who wanted to hear my stories started gathering around me. Even Blois’s parents seem really interested in the subject.

“Well… As you can see, I’m but a country bumpkin, so I was never at Lady Douve’s side at any great parties or the like, but if you wish to hear stimulating anecdotes… I’m not a particularly gifted storyteller, so I may not be able to satisfy your expectations, but I can try.”

How do I phrase this… These people are bored. It's a world without television or the internet, so of course they're going to have a lot of free time on their hands. Thinking about it, I'm sure the stories we have about serving the daughter of House Sepaeda make for an excellent source of entertainment.

"Then… Allow me to tell the story about the disturbance with the Domino Republic that occurred near Caputo. I was tasked by House Caputo to deal with the matter of the émigré nobles, so I will tell you what I can about the matter."

Surprisingly, a large number of guests were listening to me with serious expressions.

"As retainers of House Sepaeda, I'm sure you're all familiar with the sorry state of the émigré nobles that had sought refuge from the Domino Empire…"

I don't know if I should be allowed to describe them this way. Even if it's for the sake of telling an exciting story, should I be grouping all of the émigré nobles into a single group? Perhaps I simply hadn't met those among them who weren't awful people.

Still, the nobles of Domino have already been exterminated on a country-wide scale. If I were to say anything that went against the prevailing narrative, I'd probably put Blois in an awkward position. It's better to just talk about them contemptuously and go along with the accepted wisdom.

"The justly famous prince of the far off Magyan Kingdom, Magyan Tahlan… He had come to our kingdom's Caputo territories to test his skill, and he behaved as he always did, with honor and dignity. As the prince of a foreign kingdom, he is a man that even I, a fellow man, can view fondly. As for Lady Douve, well… Pardon, I got side-tracked. At any rate, he is a wonderful individual, possessing every virtue that a man could hope to possess."

The fact of the matter is, he's gifted in all sorts of ways. It seems he had felt a sense of inferiority because he didn't have the Royal Aura, but that seems to have mostly resolved itself since he's been in this kingdom. Lady Douve sure has incredible luck.

"No doubt the émigré noble couldn't restrain his jealousy of the man, and so he sent his underlings to try to entrap him. But this was a man who had distinguished himself as the greatest swordsman in his kingdom. He defeated the underlings without using his Rare Art, and instead humiliated the émigré noble."

The women and girls let out a sigh. No doubt in their minds they're drawing up the ideal man, but the real Tahlan surely surpassed even that. He was nearly flawless in body and soul, with handsome features that had to be seen to be believed.

"However, the émigré noble then became desperate to entrap the prince, using every dirty trick at his disposal. Under those circumstances, it was understandable that Prince Tahlan would grow wary of our kingdom.

Having grown to distrust the law of a foreign land, he desired instead to be defeated by the sword as punishment, and asked for the kingdom's strongest swordsman."

It's pretty embarrassing to describe myself that way.

"Which is why I ended up being brought in. Lady Douve and her retinue set off for the Caputo lands, where I wound up matching blades with Prince Tahlan. I can only describe Prince Tahlan's skill with his Rare Art, Shadow Summoning, and his skill with the blade, as most impressive. Among the opponents I've faced, he was certainly one of the most skilled."

I feel an enormous amount of envy directed my way. From multiple people, at that.

"His Rare Art crafts shadow duplicates, a technique that he wielded with skill. When used by a master swordsman like him, one goes from facing one opponent to multiple master swordsmen in a blink of an eye. These master swordsmen were all of the same skill level as he, and as they were shadows, they did not fear death. His tactics in commanding an army of deathless master swordsmen was far beyond the ken of your average mage or knight. That was proved by the émigré noble's henchmen. No matter how many banded together, they could never come close to defeating him."

For a magic user, Shadow Summoning is a difficult art to deal with. While magic has enough power to easily kill a single human, he can create infinite numbers of those humans. He can freely use them as walls or as suicide attackers. Even a mage as skilled the Regent probably couldn't defeat him at close range.

"And yet, I was Lady Douve's bodyguard, and the one regarded as the kingdom's most skilled swordsman. I wielded my Art and succeeded in subduing Prince Tahlan without harming him."

Thinking back on it, Lady Douve really had assigned me a difficult task. To defeat a master swordsman of that skill without harming him…that's a hell of a tall order.

"Once that was done, what awaited was a trial held by a hex artist. I witnessed the proceedings as one of Lady Douve's escorts, but… The hex arts are truly harrowing to witness. His Art was impressive, of course, but more so was his ability to turn others to stone without so much as batting an eye… Even the memory of it gives me pause. As for the panic of the émigré noble, I'm afraid it's far too vulgar to speak of in polite company."

I don't take much pleasure in describing the hex artist, Douverb Saive, as though he were a malign presence. But I know that's probably what he would want, and that it was the role that was required of him at that moment.

"Once the trial was finished, Prince Tahlan finally revealed that he was a prince of a foreign land, and we discovered that he was also the elder brother to a fiancee of House Batterabbe's heir, Magyan Sunae."

Which makes me wonder, is Saiga trying to woo Ran at the moment? I honestly feel like that might be for the best, but adding a berserker to the

harem… That goes beyond *yandere* into far scarier territory. A simple spat could escalate really quickly into a crime of passion, and the only ones who could stop her at that point would be Saiga and Zuger…

"As for what happened to Prince Tahlan after, I believe I'll be able to provide a happy epilogue to that story soon."

The nobles all seem thoroughly entertained and satisfied with my story. I suspect they're going to retell this story with relish down the line, or perhaps they'll just boast about having spoken with me.

"My, my, that's quite the story. Almost difficult to believe."

A noble said those words with a touch of jealousy coloring his tone. He was a little older than Blois's older sister and brother, but young for a noble. True, it's not exactly a story that's easy to believe. I understand that, but to say that out loud at a time like this?

"It's a world that's far beyond the dreams of a mere country noble like myself. I should like to see it for myself some day."

Switching between disrespectful and outright insulting…well, he was just your average noble, at least. At the very least, he didn't have a disquieting presence like Blois's sister. He probably doesn't like the fact that people younger than him, like Blois and I, are being praised and flattered by everyone. I sympathize a little with his feelings, and I wouldn't mind letting him get away with it normally, but Lain's listening to this exchange and we're direct retainers of House Sepaeda, so I can't just let it slide.

"I agree, and I'm afraid I'm not confident that I could tell it in a way that would be believed. After all, I'm an ignorant, uneducated man, who's never studied the finer things in life. I don't know how much I was able to convey with my simple words."

"Well, I should very much like to see your exploits in person."

House Sepaeda is a martial house. It's just not allowed to simply let an insult or challenge pass. As such, I can't just let this sort of talk go unchallenged.

"My exploits must all seem rather fantastical. No doubt they've all been exaggerated in the retelling."

"Yes, such is the case with rumors… Often the subject of the rumor finds themselves embarrassed to hear what's said about them, is that not so?"

"The fact that I beheaded all of my opponents in a battle, or that I defeated master swordsmen and knights without killing them… I suppose you can't believe it unless you see it for yourself, yes?"

The people who had been standing between me and the taunting noble naturally step away. They seem to have decided that I seemed displeased, felt the danger, and were moving away from it. Since I'm speaking with that tone, I suppose that's only natural.

"Y-Yes, you're right… I should like to witness your skill myself during my lifetime."

“You say you’d like to see my skill, but this is an occasion for celebration. I would prefer not to taint it with blood.”

“Y-Yes, of course! A pity.”

He thinks that it’s just a threat, an empty threat, and that I can’t really do much in reality. But, what if I actually did cut him down for insulting me? He begins to feel that fear.

“Well, well, it’s fortunate that Lady Douve isn’t here. If she were present, then... No, it would be disrespectful to speculate. Well, then... As entertainment for this happy occasion, would you care to spar with me?”

Hypothetically, if I were to laugh away his insult and do nothing else, I’m sure Lady Douve would end up yelling at me somewhere down the line. After all, this is House Sepaeda’s territory. Everyone here is a vassal of House Sepaeda. He’s casting aspersions on the exploits of the bodyguard that his own liege lord holds in high esteem. That’s just not something that can be forgiven.

“S-Surely you’re just playing!”

“Yes, it’ll just be a bit of play.”

Lady Douve has no compunctions about ordering me to kill those who deserve it. Indeed, she does so as a form of play.

“Pardon me.”

I move with Flash Step into the nobleman’s flank. I pick out the moment when the people around me go from surprise at me vanishing to turning to the man I had been glaring at and reacting in surprise as they see me standing next to him. Confirming that I have everyone’s attention, I grab the nobleman and lighten him with Feather Step, lifting him into the air as I flip him upside down.

“W-Whooooa?!”

For those watching, it must appear as though I’m showcasing an enormous amount of strength, far beyond what my body should possess. In reality, I’m actually making my opponent lighter, but there’s no way for them to know that. The victim himself doesn’t seem to be aware of it, either.

“Defeating an enemy without killing them is actually quite difficult. I’m still going through quite a bit of trial and error.”

If you knock them out in an instant, most of the time they’ll respond by saying that they were caught off guard, or that their opponent cheated, or that they could win in a rematch. The truth is that being caught off guard is proof of insufficient skill, not being able to see through an enemy’s techniques is a sign of insufficient skill, and thinking you have a chance against an opponent who knocked you out is, too, evidence of insufficient skill.

All of those excuses are caused by a lack of sufficient training, but the lack of training also makes it hard to accept reality.

“It’s not advisable to defeat an opponent, to knock them out, before they realize what’s happened.”

I take the nobleman, who is panicking at being upside down and floating in the air, flip him back around, place him on his feet, and restore his weight. As he wobbles, I place a flattened hand against his throat in a way that everyone can see.

"I'm starting to think that it's important to take the time to communicate their defeat to them in a way that anyone can recognize."

"Is he going to kill him now?" After confirming that everyone watching has weighed that possibility in their minds, I return to Blois's side with a Flash Step. If someone had been looking away for a bit, no doubt they wouldn't have any idea of what had just happened.

Still, everyone saw me suddenly vanish and suddenly appear. They were all looking back and forth, trying to figure out what had happened.

"Since it's just play, I'll end it here."

"...I-Impressive," the nobleman, now pale, manages to croak out the words as the blood drains from his features.

I'll say this again, but I'd like you to appreciate that it didn't escalate past this. Everyone here has witnessed part of my Rare Art, the Immortal Arts, and seems to have concluded that the tales of my exploits weren't all made up.

For now, I am able to put the matter to rest without hurting anyone. Even if the results get back to Lady Douve, His Brothership, or His Fathership, there won't be any problems for me or the noble. I also hope it'll wash away some of the gorier parts of my reputation. Even I care about my reputation, at least to some extent. I don't want people thinking I did those bloody things because I enjoy them.

"Wow... Very impressive!"

"Yes, literally faster than the eye could see!"

Blois's parents offer me nothing but unstinting praise. There's something about their purity I find reassuring. Honestly, the looks of envy and hatred directed my way have actually grown more intense from earlier. There were a fair number of people who thought I was showing off my strength and bragging about it. I can't help that people might see it that way. At the very least, there's some part of the display that *is* about that.

"No, no... It's just a little bit of entertainment. I might have ruffled someone's hair a bit, or kicked up a little dust. I apologize for shocking everyone by moving without warning. Please forgive me."

I'm not so petty that I'll be annoyed by that sort of look. Besides, if I were to show displeasure here, it would defeat the purpose of trying to solve this without making a fuss.

"Well, well, it was certainly an impressive display."

The one taking a very humble attitude and praising me is Lady Chette's husband. Lady Chette is standing next to him, glaring at me with her bloodshot eyes, but since she's smiling with the rest of her features, she's canceled out the sheer fright I felt in her presence.

“I’m very happy to witness even a part of the fighting skills of the kingdom’s greatest swordsman.”

“I’m afraid I may have been a bit reckless.”

“I’m quite proud of the fact that we’re going to be related.”

While the comparison might be setting the bar extremely low, he seems a much more normal person than his wife. The children, who appear a little older than Lain, are standing off to the side, and I sense that the couple seem to have a pretty good relationship.

“My son and my daughters are also quite happy about the kingdom’s greatest swordsman joining the family. Come, introduce yourselves.”

“A pleasure to meet you!”

Having witnessed my throw, their eyes glitter with admiration as they looked at me. They seem sincerely in awe of my strength, despite the fact that I didn’t look that much older than them. Their expressions have a very childish joy to them.

They wanted to shake my hand, so I let them. They’re probably going to boast about that to their friends. Kind of late for me to notice, but I’ve become a celebrity of sorts. The most popular subject is the whole gibbetting, I’m sure.

The display seems to have been so impactful that it’s sticking in everyone’s minds. I suppose that can’t be helped, since that was the original intention, but it’s still a bit of a bother. I once again curse my recklessness. I should never have opened my mouth and uttered the word gibbetting.

“I was very surprised at how strong you are!”

“You really are the strongest in this kingdom, aren’t you!”

“You don’t look that much older than us, but wow!”

I hate to point this out, but I’ve lived over five hundred years. While my looks are one thing, I am, in fact, much older than anyone else. I felt a certain guilt at their sense of admiration.

“It’s rare to be able to spend time talking with you, Blois. I know you’ve spent a long time serving as Lady Douve’s bodyguard, but I suppose you’ve now come to a point where you can live as an ordinary gentlewoman?” Lady Chette’s husband asks Blois, oblivious to my actual age.

“Yes. Lady Douve wishes for that outcome as well.”

It seems Blois had seen him at society functions, but it wasn’t as though they were in a position to share long conversations while Blois was serving as a bodyguard. This is evidently the first time they’ve spoken in such detail.

“And I suppose this young woman is Master Sansui’s daughter?”

“Hello, nice to meet you. I’m Lain!”

“Yes, nice to meet you as well. I look forward to being family with you.”

It seems he’s not aware of Lain’s origins. Based on the fact that my nephew- and nieces-in-law don’t seem to know my actual age, it appears that Lady Chette hasn’t shared that knowledge with them. That’s good, because it’s better that the number who know is kept to a minimum. I think I’ll leave that up to Blois’s parents and Lady Chette’s discretion. But still,

her eyes are scary. She keeps watching me with an intensity that feels like she is about to stare a hole right through my skin.

As part of the host family, however, the brother-in-law needed to entertain the guests, and since Lady Chette stayed at his side, she went with him. It seems that Lady Chette can maintain her reason while at a society gathering. That's a serious relief.

"It's only for a little while longer. Just grin and bear it."

Watching my reaction, Blois offers her reassurance.

"…Thanks."

I feel like we're actually interacting like a married couple, and I muster a small smile.

Aside from my little sparring match, the engagement announcement party went by without incident. Lain seemed a little tired by the end, but evidently it was still better than being continually exposed to Lady Chette's gaze.

"Thank you for dealing with that so skillfully. I appreciate it."

That Hetter came to speak to us after the party wrapped up was honestly a bit of a surprise. Even if there's an advantage to avoiding drawing my ire, there's no real advantage to him engaging in a conversation with me. Then again, it's not like I had any reason not to speak to him, either.

"No, no. It was still the method of a ruffian who only knows the way of the sword. I'm sure it wasn't pleasant to watch."

"Please don't say that. His words were an insult to House Sepaeda. If you didn't go out of your way to restrain him, it could have developed into something much worse."

It seems he really does appreciate it. I also fully agreed with his reasoning. Further, he appears to really want to engage in a detailed conversation with me.

"Blois, I'm sorry…but I'd like to speak to my future brother-in-law. Can I borrow him?"

"…Alright, big brother."

Though hesitant, Blois gives her permission. I'm sure she'd rather be on good terms with her brother if at all possible. I feel the desire to do what I can to fulfill her wishes, so I go to Hetter's room and sit down across from him.

"I wanted to be able to have a frank conversation with you. I heard you tended not to stay up particularly late, so forgive me for pulling you aside so early."

"No need to be so formal. After all, I was just a bodyguard, and it's not as though I'm going to take any particular position in the future. Unlike you, I'm just a swordsman."

Yes, I'm just a strong swordsman. It's not like I've been promised any special role in the future, nor do I have anything in the way of subordinates. Sometimes people mistakenly think I have some kind of authority, but if I

did, I would have killed Ran a long time ago. The kingdom's greatest swordsman…to put it simply, that's all I am. Ordinarily, that's not something to be envied.

"I'm sure you're well aware of the atrocities I've committed. Of course, they were all people who deserved to die, and I was simply following Lady Douve's orders. But…I'm still only capable of harming people."

It's not false modesty; I'm simply stating the truth. Honestly, other than the fact that Lain is living well, it's not as though I've got a particularly luxurious lifestyle. I'm not getting paid enormous sums of money and spending that money on all sorts of decadent indulgences. I do have some savings, but that's because I simply haven't had the time to spend the money up until to now.

"…You have me. When you put it like that, all the issues I have left sound like petty resentments."

As I thought, he has a certain amount of self-awareness. He wants to vent everything he's accumulated, but he knows that's also an embarrassing thing to do.

"There's no point in hiding it, so I'll state it knowing full well how bad it makes me look. I…I'm extremely jealous of you."

To admit that you're carrying around unsightly resentments… It's something that takes a lot of courage.

"No, if I'm honest, I also feel that toward my sister, Blois, as well."

I feel a bit guilty over having already heard about this from his youngest sister. In fact, it seems she's got him completely nailed down. Wow, Lyra really is impressive.

"May I ask why?"

"Yes…I'm this family's only son. When I was born, I was guaranteed to inherit the family title. Which is why since I was a child, I always thought about how I would govern our lands."

This sounds like a familiar story. Of course, there's nothing strange about it.

"Unlike Blois, I had no talent with magic. To say that I had no talent doesn't mean I don't have any mana at all. I just have very little."

That's worse in a way than not being able to use magic at all. At least, as a magic or Arts user.

"Still, a feudal lord has no need for magic. So, as a way of giving up on my dreams of magic, I threw myself into my studies."

Yes, it's a familiar story. He had no talent with magic, so he studied to learn how to govern his territory. It's a backstory similar to one I remember reading in the distant past. Of course, it's pretty disrespectful to think of him in that way.

"It sounds immodest for me to say this of myself, but I received a lot of praise for my intelligence. Even the previous Lord Sepaeda spoke highly of my ability."

That's impressive. That said, House Sepaeda's become the baseline for comparison in my head, which sounds a bit like my perceptions on these things are extremely narrow.

"But...my father wouldn't allow me to participate in governing. Of course, I was only about ten or so at the time."

Well, of course. No matter how smart they were, no one would let a ten year old govern a territory. He seems to sense that I was a bit flabbergasted that he had needed to be informed of that at the time, and offers a dry chuckle. It seems it's a form of self-deprecation, as though he, too, thinks it was a foolish thing to expect in hindsight.

"I'm now a father to children as well. If my own son came to me and asked to let him take over some of the management of our lands, I'd have to laugh and turn him down. And, while my father is quite plain, he's also quite serious. Even when we were at our old, poverty-stricken estate, he still managed it according to tradition and ran it fairly despite its poverty."

Hetter probably thinks his father might have done with making an improvement or two, but that his father had still done more than a good job.

"When I was a child, my dream was to have my father accept my ability and to make improvements to our feudal estate. But...three things came together to put an end to that dream. Those being that Blois had talent in magic and sword, that the lord who used to govern this estate was found to be corrupt, and that Lady Douve was seeking someone with good looks to serve as her bodyguard."

This was the same as the story I'd heard from Blois and Lyra. Even with Blois's talent in magic and blade, if the timing hadn't been right, they wouldn't have been given the new estate. I don't know if that was fortunate for Blois or not.

"I know now just how absurd my attempts were in hindsight. A poor estate wouldn't have had the funds to undertake any improvements, and I would have ended up living a life of frustration and irritation. It may sound contradictory, but it's because we now govern a prosperous estate that we have the room to make improvements."

This should be good news, but Hetter himself seems conflicted. As for me, listening to this story, there was a different shock for me. Everything that Lyra had said was completely right. His younger sister sees completely through him. It makes me wonder if he really is all that smart.

"...Of course, I appreciate all that my sister has done. It's thanks to her service that we live a good life. But...I can't help but wonder. That Blois, who is younger, who is less mature than I am, is appreciated by both my mother and father, and has contributed far more to House Wynne's advancement."

"I'll be honest. To have my fiancee's efforts be thought of that way is extremely disagreeable. That said, I do understand your feelings on the matter."

I’m sure he couldn’t say it to Blois directly, but he admitted it to me out of sincerity and honor. There’s part of me that doesn’t quite grasp just what sort of sincerity and honor that is. I’d like him to consider what it feels like to be the man told by his future brother-in-law that he’s jealous of his wife-to-be’s accomplishments.

“My apologies…”

He does seem self-aware about it, at least.

“As a man, I’m afraid when I was younger I still wished to make a name for myself as a warrior. To have my younger sister actually accomplish that…I, the son and heir, who was supposed to protect his younger sister, ended up being overtaken by her.”

I’m sure it was hard for him as an adolescent. I can understand why he’d struggle as a teen. But I do have to question the fact that he’s still carrying around all that baggage.

“Ordinarily, Blois’s talents would have nothing to do with running a noble estate. However, my sister became the favorite of the infamous Lady Douve. As a result, I ended up with a resentment that I didn’t know how to deal with. The fact that we’re highly regarded is all thanks to my sister’s efforts. That I could marry well is thanks to my sister. And during that time, all I could do was continue my studies and carry myself in high society as a proper heir should.”

Even as his sister was making sacrifices for the family, he had yet to accomplish anything. Yes, I can understand why that’d be frustrating as her older brother. I could sympathize with him on that front.

“…But now, my sister will be marrying you, and will be retiring from her service as a warrior. When she left the Wynne household, she was still a child. She will, at last, find some security for herself. It’s not that I don’t have any lingering resentments, but…I remember when she was but a baby. Which is why, more than anything, I want my sister to be happy.”

He’s conflicted in his heart, but he’s grateful that his sister has overcome trying circumstances and understands that she’d made sacrifices for her family, which is why he wants to leave her future to me. He wants me to make her happy. If not for his whining at the beginning, it would be pretty moving. Yes, I can read people’s auras, but as a husband I’d rather just hear the pretty parts. Does no one think that silence can be golden in this world?

“Yes, I’ll do everything in my power.”

“Thank you, I leave her in your hands.”

With that said, he starts switching over his mindset. It seems he’s gotten the weight off his chest and has found closure for his own complexes.

“I’d like to make a name for myself as a lord and have the Wynne name known for that as much as for my sister’s martial exploits. I’ll make this estate so prosperous that people will hear of it at House Sepaeda itself,” Hetter says, motivating himself.

But, having heard Lyra's projections for the future, the only thing I can say is good luck. Just like how no matter what I accomplish, I won't advance any further, he, too, is already at his peak. I feel bad for thinking this as he's motivating himself to compete against his sister, but I doubt anyone will hear of him at House Sepaeda.

A smart new lord has made a prosperous estate even richer… That won't make him famous, because there's nothing interesting about that. He's dreaming of the future and is full of hope. He's motivated to make his name even more famous than his sister, but even if he accomplishes everything he sets out to do, he probably won't obtain what he most desires.

"I see…I'm afraid with my ignorance I can do nothing but cheer you on, but I pray for the sake of the people of your estate that you succeed."

As a simple fact, what I said to him at first was the unvarnished truth. He has the ability to make a lot more people happy as the lord of an estate than I do as a swordsman who just happens to be really strong. Even if he only makes modest gains, those are worthy accomplishments if they make the people of this area happy. Even if his efforts aren't appreciated by the people, that's still not a bad thing.

But, his wish will remain unfulfilled. No matter how skilled he is as a governor, his ambitions came to an end the moment the family came to this estate. His healthy spirit of competition is badly misplaced. My opinion of the motivated young man in front of me has fallen lower than Lyra's.

"I wish you the best of luck."

But, silence is golden. Since I feel that way, I think it best not to reveal the truth to someone else.

Part 12 — On the Verge

“No, no, I need more training.”

The morning after the party, I engage in training as I reflect on my actions.

House Wynne’s garden is quite expansive and the trees are well maintained. Lit by the morning dawn, I swing my wooden sword to rid myself of unnecessary thoughts.

Everything should be like training. Training’s value is in maintaining it. Special training and cramming are far removed from true strength or learning. Effort is a lifestyle choice, and its lack isn’t something that can be compensated for temporarily doing extra work.

“Humbly. Deliberately.”

I didn’t do very well yesterday. I looked down on others under the guise of observing them. I think I held many of them, from my brother-in-law Hetter on down, in contempt.

“First, I need to reflect on my own deficiencies.”

They had gathered to celebrate our future. To try to imagine what they truly felt based on the mere fact that I could read their auras is completely graceless and tacky. Anyone would find that sort of treatment disagreeable.

Worse, I’ve let myself be too prejudiced against them from the start. Like Blois, after learning that Hetter and Chette didn’t like Blois, I think I ended up feeling a bit of a persecution complex.

“So long as I live, I might make people angry. But if I notice I’m doing it, I should do my best to fix that.”

That was true of my view of Hetter himself, as well. He does have his share of ambition, but all he wants is to work hard and be recognized for his efforts. To think of him as not knowing his place for it, just how conceited am I? I let Lyra’s opinion of him influence my own. Even if she didn’t intend to do so, she had colored my perceptions.

“Errm…”

As I reflect and continue my practice, I feel someone with an enormously powerful gaze approaching me. Because I’m an Immortal, I can feel the presence of people through their auras, but given the sinister nature of this gaze, I think even a normal person would feel it, too. It’s approaching from behind, but I can tell who it is without turning. It’s Lady Chette.

Because her obsession with my youth has given her insomnia, she hasn’t been sleeping well, and she seems even more entranced than before. That she needs to be the center of attention…honestly, she really needs to expand her own horizons a bit.

“Immortality… Eternal youth…”

Even exposed to her gaze, my swings don’t falter. That’s a result of my training. I should think of it as a good thing.

“Soft, supple skin…”

I think Blois's older sister is driving herself into a corner. I suppose one could say she's extremely protective of her dignity as a woman, but surely being obsessed just with that is a serious problem.

"Why don't I...? Why do people other than I...?"

While I'm currently dealing with psychological pressure, I'm still able to maintain a perspective wide enough to maintain awareness of my surroundings. I should celebrate the fact that I'm able to maintain my training under these trying circumstances. It's the fruit of my long years of training. The atmosphere right now is honestly stranger than actual combat is.

"But I'm trying so...so hard...to stay beautiful, to stay young..."

I really shouldn't let myself get distracted with those thoughts. At this rate she's going to try to strangle me from behind. How can I restore her to something resembling sanity when she's busily converting her envy into outright hatred? I don't have the necessary techniques to deal with this situation. That's a sign I don't have enough training.

What would my Master...what would Tahlan do at a time like this?

"If it won't be mine, then..."

Oh boy, she's getting too close. I can't ignore her any longer. Let's stop practicing and try to talk to her.

"Good morning, Lady Chette. It's a little cloudy today, but the weather seems nice."

"A five hundred year old immortal... I also want...!"

Her hands clearly start reaching for my neck.

"Whoa! I guess you're still half asleep this morning!"

I cut off the conversation and unleash a Ki Wave into Blois's sister's head, putting her to sleep by knocking her out. I'm not very good at talking people down, but I'm quite good at shutting them up through physical force.

"Are you alright? I'll take you back to the manor immediately!"

Fortunately, there's no one else around. I make my excuses to no one in particular, then lighten her with Feather Step to carry her back to the house. I pretend to be in a great hurry as I make my way back inside.

"So, that's what happened this morning."

"Maybe she's sick?"

Lain gave her frank opinion after I returned to my assigned room and explained the situation to Blois and Lain. True, it is an illness of sorts. Or at the very least, it's bordering on illness, and if it progresses she'll eventually need to be admitted to a hospital.

"Chette's that far gone...?"

"It's not your fault. But...yes, the symptoms are pretty bad."

Blois, Lain, and I are brainstorming in the guest room. Of course, it's not an issue of life or death for us. We're not going to stay in this manor for long, so we just need to bear it until we're ready to return to the capital. But, if we did that, I don't know what would happen to Lady Chette. I don't

feel right about just leaving her as she falls further into her spiral of obsessive depression.

"I'd like to somehow lighten her spirits but…is that possible?"

"Yeah. I mean, there's nothing that can be done about a person aging, anyway."

"You're the one person here who's not allowed to say that. You've overcome aging, after all," Blois says critically. True, I don't age, and that's the cause of her sister's manic jealousy.

"Overcome it… It's not like I wanted to overcome aging, you know…"

Overcoming it makes it sound like I'm afraid of aging. I've never been afraid of aging. After all, I stopped aging before my growth phase ended. However, having a man who doesn't age say 'You're beautiful no matter how old you get' would just be pouring fuel on the fire. I'd probably have to drag someone like the Regent here to make those words convincing.

"You know, looking at your Master, Suiboku, are you sure there's no technique for rejuvenation?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, even if he is an Immortal, your Master is just a little too small, isn't he?"

You know…I never actually thought about that. I always thought that Immortals were all like that and that's the sort of man my master was, so I never had any reason to question it.

"You know, by that logic, doesn't that mean my Master's been rejuvenating his body regularly? I don't think my Master would do that…"

"That's true, but look at him physically; he doesn't look like he'd be able to swing a sword. His arms and legs are too short. Maybe it's not a technique for rejuvenation, but surely there's some way for him to adjust the shape of his body."

"Even if there is, it wouldn't mean anything if he couldn't use it on someone else. Besides, it doesn't change the fact that I can't use it."

Regarding this sort of thing, I'd have to check with my master or Eckesachs to be sure, and even if I did learn the answer, it wouldn't solve anything.

"Besides, even if there is a technique to make other people younger, it wouldn't be a solution. I don't think a person without ki would stop aging, and they wouldn't be able to stand living forever if they didn't have the mindset of an Immortal."

"True. In terms of mental states, you're probably the oddest one of all… I mean, five hundred years of practice swings…"

I do think it's pretty odd that people can become immortal just because they possess ki. But as a once normal person, I have to wonder, just what would you do with immortality? I mean, I suppose if you're something like an artist or a mathematician, then sure, there's no amount of life that would be enough. Same for someone seeking to master a path like the sword.

However, for someone who just wants to maintain their current state or remain at the peak of their youth, living forever would probably just result in them slowly wasting away.

“No, it’s the other way around. It’s because I spent five hundred years doing practice swings that I was able to bear it all those years. If I had done nothing but lay around, then I probably would’ve killed myself within the first ten years.”

Honestly, unending youth isn’t a problem that should be solved. Lyra seems to have already realized this, but once you achieve a means to regain your youth, you’d just end up focused on that forever. In that sense, it’s not a very constructive thing to do.

“Why does she look so scary all the time… She’s so pretty.”

Lain’s words probably sound like sarcasm. Lady Douve has said it before, but a flower’s prime is short. Chette is still beautiful, but that beauty will keep aging and fading.

“Your sister is really in a bad way. If this continues, she might very well end up dying.”

If we leave her like this, the insomnia and the mania might eventually lead her to commit suicide.

“…Yes, I can see that from looking at her.”

“At the very least, if she’d sleep properly, her health would improve quite a bit, and her complexion at least would get a lot better.”

I must have been the trigger that made her fear of aging spiral out of control. In that sense, it’s my fault. But there’s nothing I can do about it.

“Maybe we should give her some sedatives and call them rejuvenation pills?”

“How much will that solve?”

“It might help a little bit?”

“Then there’s no point…”

Dangit, and here all I wanted to do was enjoy my time off with my family. Why do I have to deal with someone even more dangerous than Lady Douve?

“Then… Why don’t we start by telling your parents everything?”

I can’t help but feel it might already be too late to take action, but I think I’ve ended up driving her into a place where I need to take some corrective action for her sake. It’s odd to say this about myself, but I’m bad at lying. If Lady Douve asks ‘Did anything happen while you were over there?’ I’d have to answer honestly.

If she were to do anything directed at me that can’t just be swept under the rug… I’m a direct retainer of House Sepaeda, so even if the attempt ends in failure, Lady Douve won’t let it pass. That goes the same for His Brothership and His Fathership.

“Considering the worst case scenario… We should tell them everything up front. I’ll apologize for knocking her out.”

“…You realize we’re talking about my mother and father, here.”

“…I mean, if you say so, Papa.”

Neither Lain or Blois seem to be expecting much out of my plan. It’s true; if they haven’t noticed that their daughter has that unnatural expression, I do have to ask if they could even see what’s in front of them. That said, talking it out with the head of House Wynne is still the right thing to do. At the very least, that’s what it means to do things in the House Sepaeda style.

“Besides, while I don’t sound convincing when I say this, Blois, your dad is a man House Sepaeda’s Lord Emeritus regarded as worthy. Let’s try trusting in his judgment.”

Part 13 — Resolution

We then left our room and went to see the parents. It's almost time for breakfast, and the parents are talking with Lyra and Hetter.

Lyra and Hetter both seem relieved that Chette isn't present. At least, that's the impression I got from the scene. I feel guilty about dropping a bomb onto this gathering, but it still needs to be said.

"Oh, hello there, Sansui! Blois! Little Lain! We've been waiting here. Though we still have a little time."

"Yes, why don't we have a bit of tea? Do you take sugar?"

Just a glance at our expressions should tell them that we didn't come down here to have breakfast with everyone, so I don't understand why they don't notice. At the very least, Hetter, Lyra, and even the maids that are preparing tea and breakfast seem to have noticed.

"Oh, I heard that Chette fainted while in the yard. Evidently you helped her?"

"Sigh, that's probably because she stayed up all night again. She's always been like that, ever since she was a girl. She hasn't even fixed that, despite the fact that she's a mother now…"

"There's something I'd like to tell you concerning her," I say.

That she's suffering from sleep deprivation is true. At the same time, there's a fact that they don't seem to be aware of.

"Do you know why she's suffering from insomnia?"

"Chette is a grown woman, married, and with children of her own. I'm sure she has plenty of problems to deal with. But she's also at an age where she needs to be independent from her parents. We plan to wait until she comes to us for help."

"Yes, I don't think we're causing her any problems about the status of our House…but even then, there might be something else bothering her."

At this moment, everyone but the parents felt the exact same thing. *'Why don't you notice?'* We even felt a bit of fear at their obliviousness. I didn't even have to read any auras; it showed in everyone's expression.

"Well… Ahm… The fact is…"

I can't just start out by saying 'Your daughter tried to strangle me this morning.' Let's start from the beginning.

"You're aware that because I look young, Lady Chette asked me to teach her the secret to appearing young, yes?"

"Oh… Of course."

"Well, at that time, I realized that Lady Chette is…well, envious of my youth. And to be quite frank…she's been struggling to come to terms with it."

"Really?!"

"Oh my!"

It was here that the parents finally reacted with shock. Everyone has the word *'Finally!'* etched on their foreheads, but they don't seem to notice.

“I believe she’s suffering from depression as she struggles to cope with the reality that she’s growing older. That’s probably the cause of the insomnia. As an Immortal, I can feel her moods through her aura, and her emotions have gone from just jealousy to outright hostility. I said that she fell asleep earlier...but the truth is that I stopped her before she could attack me.”

“Oh no...”

“That’s...”

“I want to deal with this peacefully before it gets to Lady Douve. I’d like to ask you for your help in figuring out a solution.”

At that, the parents finally stand up and hurry to the room where Lady Chette was sleeping. All of us bite our tongues at the fact they’re finally in a bit of a panic and follow them. In the worst case scenario, I’ll just have to knock her out again.

“Dear...”

“Yes, I leave it in your hands.”

The only one who entered the room was her mother. Her father stood in front of the room, bitterly regretting the fact that he didn’t notice what was happening to his daughter. I admit, I also have to wonder how the heck they missed such obvious signs of madness.

“Chette, wake up.”

“Mother...”

We can hear the conversation inside the room. Everyone other than her father and I look a bit wary as they hear her voice, but I realized something by reading the auras in the room. While she hasn’t come to her senses, the overwhelming hostility was no longer there.

“Tell me, have you been having trouble sleeping? I heard you fell asleep in the garden.”

“...”

“Something upset you, didn’t it? You always did have trouble sleeping after something hurt you.”

The conversation was very much one between a mother and daughter. While Chette was already married and had children of her own, it didn’t change the fact that she was still a daughter.

“...Um, you see, Mother. Everyone looks at other girls now, not me.”

“Oh... That must be hard for you.”

“Yes... No one ever looks at me any more. They don’t look at me and say, ‘she’s cute,’ or ‘she’s pretty.’”

We hear her sobbing through the door. Ordinarily, a noble manor should have a fair amount of soundproofing, but even through all of that, we could clearly hear her crying from the hallway.

“I put so much effort into doing my makeup, I put effort into how I walk and how I smile, but no one says that I’m the prettiest.”

“Oh, but I know. I know that you’re always trying very hard.”

“I’ve studied a lot so that I can be interesting to talk to...”

“Yes, I know. As the oldest, you never do show weakness in front of your brother or sisters.”

It should have been obvious upon reflection. But in this case, everyone has only just now realized what she has been struggling with. Even if she was a talented beauty, regardless of just how beautiful an idol she was, one that could melt men’s hearts and set women aflame in jealousy… For all of that, like Blois and her other siblings, she had to put in an enormous amount of effort to make the best of her talents.

What she’s losing from age is the result of a lifetime’s worth of effort. Her beauty is the culmination of years and years of tireless work. She wasn’t just born with a pretty face, but had spent years refining herself.

“Oh, Mother…is it all over for me? Am I no longer the girl everyone admires?”

“Of course not, Chette. You were and still are…the most beautiful girl in the world.”

At the very least, I felt embarrassment. We were so exasperated at the fact the parents hadn’t noticed her change that we believed they didn’t understand a thing about their daughter.

We were mistaken. No, it was her parents, and only her parents, who understood better than anyone the tireless effort Chette had put into being beautiful. Which is exactly why they could show empathy for her.

I feel her heart slowly find peace, let go of her pains, and then fall into a restful slumber. Though I think I could have done that even without the ability to read auras.

“I’m…a useless fool. I didn’t notice my own daughter’s pain.”

Blois’s dad, while downtrodden, clearly understands the situation. There’s a part of me that completely agrees with his sentiment. But, given how things have played out, I can’t speak ill of him. All of us who believed that Lady Chette was just a woman who was obsessed with beauty could do nothing but remain silent.

“…This is going to sound like an excuse, Sansui. My wife and I, when we heard of this match, we were truly happy. So happy that we lost sight of our oldest daughter.”

The optimism and joy that had permeated him when he was relaxing in the breakfast room had completely vanished. As his expression showed, Blois’s dad felt a deep gratitude toward me.

“I’m sure you’re much more familiar with Lord Sepaeda and the others than we are. As such, I’m sure you know just how much they love Lady Douve, and just how much they’re loyal to the concept of duty.”

“Yes, they’re very strict in that regard.”

“It’s a general argument, but even if Blois had no talent whatsoever, if a powerful member of House Sepaeda had ordered us to hand over our daughter, we’d have had no right to deny that request. We might be called noble, but that’s the limit of our power.”

With my knowledge of just how rotten the Imperial nobility had been, his example was a disturbingly realistic one.

“In that sense, House Sepaeda is still a merciful master. If that weren’t the case, even if the timing was fortuitous, they wouldn’t have offered us this estate in exchange for our daughter. If they had simply said they were going to make our daughter their daughter’s shield, then all we could do was nod.”

Hearing those words, Hetter’s expression fell.

“Which is why I sent my daughter to them. To be honest…When I sent her out, it felt like I was holding her funeral.”

That was the average judgment of an average noble. Even being average, the father understood what his brilliant son Hetter did not. As a noble, he understood what he was doing. It was a commitment, a dedication, that was far more important than mere talent.

“Which is why I worked as hard as I possibly could. It was an opportunity that my daughter had earned for us by risking her very life. I knew I needed to do everything I could to protect it. Even if it seemed average to Hetter, I stuck with doing things the same way each year without changing a thing. And as a result… I’ve somehow managed to keep this estate without having it taken away from us.”

What House Sepaeda had given him was not the right to manage a prosperous estate, but the opportunity to become the lord of a prosperous estate. Blois’s dad has finally voiced all of the concern, worry, and stress he’d built up over the years of treating his assignment as a precious opportunity.

“My wife and I always read the letters Blois would send us. No matter what they said, I couldn’t help but think they might be her last words, and I could never really focus on understanding what she was telling me. Whenever I got a glimpse of Blois serving as Lady Douve’s bodyguard, I couldn’t help but think that would be the last time I ever saw her. In the end, no matter what the rumors said, I couldn’t believe that my daughter would survive to see out the end of her duty.”

It was then that I finally grasped the reason why Blois’s parents had been so nonchalant and lackadaisical. Their heads were full of the realization that Blois would live to retire. Their hearts were filled with the overwhelming relief that Blois had safely completed her service.

“No matter what rumors we heard of Blois or of you, Sansui, we couldn’t relax. Of course, we weren’t always thinking about Blois. I had my work to worry about, and there were also the other children.”

I finally felt the commitment and sense of duty that defined House Sepaeda from Blois’s dad. The belief that a bodyguard should go into the job fully expecting to die in the line of duty was the sort of commitment that underlined my trust of House Sepaeda.

“But even then, I was always worried about when we’d get the bad news, that she’d return as a silent body, or that we wouldn’t even have a body to

bury… But that’s all over now. Blois won’t die in battle. That simple fact has given us so much joy…”

He had never lost his sense of urgency. He had always been tense. He may have been plain, but he was still a father and a lord. The sight of him confessing all of this as he wept, to me, was the very model of a dignified adult.

“Father…”

“Blois, forgive me. Forgive me for handing you, not even an adult, but a mere child, over to House Sepaeda…”

Blois’s dad is a man who, because he was average, had perfectly normal reactions to his burdens. It must have been so very difficult for him until recently. A heavy burden was gone. They had one less thing to worry about. That was why Blois’s parents had been so extraordinarily cheerful.

“Father…I…I…those words are enough for me!”

Blois’s words, too, came from the bottom of her heart. In the end, for Blois, it was enough that her parents were truly, unabashedly happy for her. It was enough that her parents, despite my presence and Lain’s presence, which added various complications, were fully and without reservation happy for her.

“Sansui… I know it’s thanks to you.”

Now it was my turn.

“No doubt you protected Blois. I’m sure you worried about Blois even as you were protecting Lady Douve.”

Those words were a formality of sorts. He had constantly said he was thankful for me. Now, the words just happened to include tears. Now his ecstatic happiness had turned to relief.

Which is why I returned a simple, plain answer.

“Rest assured. From now on, I’ll make Blois happy.”

“Thank you… Thank you…”

Blois’s dad wiped away his tears and changed the mood of the room. He turned to face Hetter. The Hetter who had been jealous every time he’d heard news of his younger sister. The Hetter who had never imagined Blois would die.

“Hetter… I’ll take this opportunity to tell you bluntly.”

“…Yes.”

“I could never have left the estate in your hands.”

It didn’t change the fact that Blois’s dad was average. No doubt this had been the first time Dad had so clearly described his feelings about Blois. Meaning, this was also the first time Hetter had thought to seriously consider what his father was telling him.

“…I now understand why.”

“Yes, that’s right. It’s because you didn’t have the commitment, the commitment to put down roots here. Here, in this land that was gifted to you not by some ancestor you never met, but your little sister. The little sister who you knew as a baby, who sacrificed everything to obtain it…!”

The plain, unassuming father lectured the extremely talented son, but it was clear which one of them was right, and no doubt those with authority in House Sepaeda knew it as well. Which is why, despite acknowledging Hetter's talent, they never pressured Dad to turn over the reins to Hetter. It's why they left it up to Dad's discretion on when to step back.

"Let me also say this. I'm sure you have talent. But there's no need for talent to govern a feudal estate!"

I think about the term 'governing cheat.' I think about the fact that there were stories about such things. It reminded me that those things were, in the end, just stories.

"If talent was necessary for running a feudal estate, then the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda would have never given this estate to me! What's needed to govern a feudal estate is restraint! The restraint to remember that this land isn't ours, but rather that it's been entrusted to us by the Crown and by House Sepaeda!"

"…As you say, Father."

It was probably because he was extremely moved, but the words that came out of Dad's mouth were extremely weighty. Hetter, who was on the receiving end of those words, seemed like he was getting pummeled by them.

"You didn't have the commitment to protect the land entrusted to us by House Sepaeda and pass it on to the next generation! Even I could tell that you didn't want to rely upon the land that your sister had given us!"

"It is as you say…"

"You only thought of these lands as a stepping stone to something greater! You dreamed that if you were to do well here, House Sepaeda would give you something greater, didn't you?!"

"…Yes."

He did want to improve the estate. Hetter wished to truly produce results. He felt that he could make this land better. I don't think that's a bad thing for the estate. But that's just my opinion as an amateur.

"…I am, as you well know, a plain and average man. I couldn't find the words to communicate this to you, my brilliant son."

Without an opportunity like this, Blois's dad could never have communicated his true feelings and passion to his son. Blois's dad cursed his own lack of talent. He probably felt that no matter what he said, Hetter wouldn't be convinced by his arguments.

"If the worst were to come to pass… At that point, I would have left it to Lyra's husband. You would have gone to House Sepaeda itself to serve… I don't know what you're hoping for, but even if you were to make a name for yourself, nothing will change. All that would be waiting for you there is more work."

The father conveys a harsh reality to his son, the son that believes in his own future. Those words were ones I understood well. Even I, the most powerful man in the kingdom, am limited to protection and to instruction.

That means that, in the end, what I was doing wasn't much different than any other swordsman.

"Lyra probably doesn't, but surely you do remember, yes? The life we had in our old estate. The life that couldn't, even on the best day, be called comfortable."

"...Yes. Even the most flattering description wouldn't call it good."

"Yes. My average work there was recognized and I was given this land. But my work as a lord didn't change much. All that changed was our location."

They went from being poor to being rich. That itself was a very large change. At the very least, Dad didn't dismiss it as trivial. But how he worked didn't change much, either. If it had, no doubt someone else would have been given the job.

"Even if you have talent, if that's for working as an administrator... The difference is only in terms of scale. That should just be left to people who were born to the right position."

Those words felt like they went against the teachings of skill being all-important to House Sepaeda, but I knew they weren't.

"Throw away your desire to outdo Blois. Forget that you have talent and knowledge. You were born to be the heir to House Wynne. Fulfill that role. To be able to fulfill that responsibility...is what it means to have skill."

To be well-known, to leave your name in the history books...all of those things must be discarded as trivial.

"If you are truly skilled, then no matter what job you do or where you do it, you'll be able to do your best work for this kingdom. Listen carefully. House Sepaeda's belief in skill above all else...is about removing those who can't fulfill their roles. It doesn't mean that those with 'skill' will always climb to the top."

"...I swear I will carry those words with me."

It's resolved. Everything's sorted.

If Blois's dad had been as capable as the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda, this probably wouldn't have gotten so complicated and tangled up in the first place. But still, as head of House Wynne, Blois's dad had solved all of his family's problems. That is, in a sense, what House Sepaeda means by 'skill.'

Part 14 — Ill Portents

“A feudal lord has no need for talent.” There is a kind of wisdom in those words. Well, sure, a feudal lord is like a prefectural governor. While there’s some prestige associated with the title, they are, in the end, still just one out of many within the kingdom. Arcana isn’t in some kind of period of upheaval, so it’s just a matter of doing bureaucratic and administrative work.

It might not be the most tactful way of phrasing it, but even on Earth, that sort of position was often hereditary. That means that it doesn’t take a genius to do that sort of work. Sure, they need a certain amount of education, but so long as that person was able to put in the effort and take the job seriously, that’s all that’s really needed of them.

One could understand why Blois’s dad felt that the ambitious Hetter didn’t intend to do the job seriously. I mean, Hetter himself admitted as much. Thinking about it, neither Blois nor I have seen anyone who could really be called preternaturally gifted in a role that didn’t involve combat, despite all of the politicians we’ve met all having had the right attitude and commitment to their jobs. Even when it came to the awful nobles of the Domino Empire, it wasn’t that they were lacking in talent. Looking at them, one realized that their problems went far deeper than just a lack of ability.

In the end, all Blois, Lain, and I should’ve done in the first place was trust in Blois’s dad. We should’ve trusted the man who, despite being average in ability, had been an entirely competent feudal lord.

“I’m sorry, Blois.”

“Forgive me, Blois.”

Lady Chette, who finally woke up around noon, came with Hetter to apologize. They came simply to say they were sorry to their sister.

“You finally brought a lovely partner home and all I could think about was myself…”

“No, it’s alright. No doubt your life in high society brought its share of stress.”

Blois is more than happy to forgive them. Given how bad things were earlier, the improvement was more than enough reason to rejoice.

“My apologies for my offenses, Master Sansui… I was so disrespectful to you, my sister’s future husband. I’m not just ashamed, but outright contrite.”

“Please don’t let it trouble you any further.”

Lain and I felt the same way. I mean, this isn’t a fairy tale, so I never expected everything to get fixed just by laying everything out in the open. I should’ve just gone ahead and told her parents that their eldest daughter wasn’t in her right mind. Honesty is the best policy, I guess.

“I don’t care what you think of me, Master Sansui. But I beg that you don’t think any less of Blois because of me.”

“Of course not.”

In the end, humans are multi-faceted creatures. It's true that there's a part of Lady Chette that's obsessed with beauty, but there's also another part of her that's genuinely happy to see her younger sister bring home a fiancé after a long absence.

"I appreciate your magnanimity..."

I'm just glad the problem's been settled.

"However, if you're ever taught how to restore someone's youth, please send me a note."

"...Yes, if I ever have the opportunity."

"Thank you so very much."

The madness briefly returned to Lady Chette's eyes, but it passed quickly enough. Would Lady Douve eventually look at me like that? Oh boy, that's just another thing to add to my list of potential future worries.

"Blois... I don't know how to make it up to you."

It's Hetter's turn to apologize.

"No you needn't..."

"I knew that I needed to be grateful for all you've done for us. I knew that, but I let my jealousy get the better of me. Even if I understood it on an intellectual level, deep down inside, I just kept resenting you."

I'm sure your younger sister getting all the fame and glory isn't easy to deal with, and I can understand Hetter's feelings and his belief in viewing talent as being the absolute, most important thing in the world. Ultimately, though, Hetter doesn't have enough self-awareness. It didn't occur to him that Blois was in a dangerous line of work and that she was at constant risk of death. He might have known it in an abstract sense, but it was never an important consideration for him.

"You have an immense amount of talent with the sword and with magic. And to top it off, you were taken in by House Sepaeda and distinguished yourself so much that your exploits were well-known in this remote corner of the land... I was just so envious of you."

He himself hadn't been able to make use of his talents, so he envied his sister who was making the most of hers. No doubt he had convinced himself that she was using her talents to their fullest and had a fulfilling life in service of House Sepaeda. The reality is that, even with her talents, Blois still suffered. She had to protect Lady Douve with her life, and while she wanted to indulge in the same things every teenager was interested in, she clamped down on those desires and threw herself into her training to survive. Blois's mom and dad had understood that fact, but Hetter, her brother, had not.

"I thought you were living a glorious life because you had talents geared for combat. Unlike Father or Mother, it never crossed my mind that you were risking life and limb every day..."

"It was my role, Hetter. I was just doing my duty, fulfilling my duty to the best of my ability."

“If we’re going to talk about it in those terms, I wasn’t able to fulfill my duty at all. I did nothing. Not my role, not my duty, and not even the simple act of appreciating your sacrifice. Forgive me.”

Because he had put his talent above all else, he didn’t understand concepts like danger or even commitment. He had believed that because Blois had talent, she would be fine, and didn’t bother to think any further than that.

“Say, Lyra… When did Chette start falling into her depression?” Blois’s father asked.

“You know… Honestly, I didn’t notice at all, either,” her mother said.

“Father, Mother… Chette’s suffering and obsession started right after the two of you spoke to us about Master Sansui,” the youngest daughter answered with a touch of exasperation.

“Really?!”

“Yes, that’s when she fell into that state.”

“So why didn’t anyone tell us?!”

Everyone present couldn’t quite contain their astonishment. I mean, just how overjoyed at Blois’s news were they that they’d completely missed all the clues? Honestly, even I can’t get a good handle on it.

“Lyra, next time please tell your father about this.”

“Yes. There’s also plenty that your mother doesn’t notice, either, dear.”

Seems that the parents really trust Lyra’s judgment, in contrast to how they feel about Hetter. Seeing the gap in trust, Hetter can’t keep the disappointment from his face. Lyra, noticing Hetter’s expression, decides to fan the flames a bit more.

“Oh, well, all’s well that ends well, right? I mean, I think all of the important problems are solved now. I’d honestly given up on Hetter, but Father was able to resolve that cleanly.”

It’s actually quite reassuring to hear Lyra describe all the “important problems” as resolved. If there really were problems so serious that they couldn’t have been dealt with this easily, I doubt House Sepaeda’s lords would have sent us here on vacation. The problems facing House Wynne, in the end, were problems that Mom and Dad were capable of solving. Being able to solve the family’s problems showed that they were good parents. I need to make sure I learn from their example.

“Lyra… You…”

Hetter seems to want to try to argue against Lyra.

“Oh come now, Brother, isn’t that perfectly natural? After all, the only thing you’d do is rebel against Father. Of course I’d worry about you as your sister.”

“Urk…”

“You understand now, right? That Father was right and you were wrong? I mean, despite the fact that being the lord of this estate was your eventual destination, you were so obsessed with this abstract notion of becoming

more famous than your younger sister. Even Father noticed that you weren't ready to take over as the lord of the estate."

It might have been different in an age of war, but in an age of peace, well, his ambitions would just cause problems. If Hetter really wanted to surpass his sister in fame, then he should have renounced his inheritance and gone to the capital. Not that he'd be guaranteed to succeed if he had.

"In that sense, Blois and Master Sansui are as impressive as their reputations suggest. I can see why House Sepaeda puts their complete trust in them. They understand their place. It really is important, isn't it? Knowing one's place? Restraint?"

Blois, Lain, and I all nod in complete agreement. Those on the bottom of the totem pole have their own jobs to fulfill, and what's most important is that they do those jobs properly.

"That's something you didn't have, Brother, knowledge of your own place. No sense of restraint."

"That's enough..."

"Oh? I think it's a good lesson for the bright heir who wouldn't listen when his sister tried to warn him while also maintaining her own restraint."

Lyra keeps pushing; judging, probably correctly, that she can get away with saying anything she wants at this moment. This was, in its own way, how this family got along with each other. It's actually quite heartwarming, though it does remind me a bit of Lady Douve.

"You can't trust people without restraint. You can't trust people who don't understand their own limits. It's a lesson you really needed to learn, Hetter."

"Grr..."

"Besides, for you to try to compete with an ace, a person who's on equal footing with your beloved New Emperor, Fuushi Ukyou... Well, that's completely lacking in restraint, moderation, or any sense of your limits. They're so remarkable that they're fully trusted by the King himself, despite all of them being foreigners. Are you really so stupid to think you can compete against a 500-year-old Immortal?"

Blois nods in intense agreement. Because she's been fighting by my side for such a long time, she's probably more aware of how important it is not to compare yourself to people beyond your reach.

"That's right, Hetter. As Lady Douve's bodyguard, I have had the opportunity to meet the aces and the Chairman of the neighboring Domino Republic... People with my level of talent are hardly unusual."

The reason Blois has been valued for so long by House Sepaeda is because she meets the minimum standards of things like looks, swordsmanship, magical ability, and the like, while also being trustworthy.

From House Sepaeda's point of view, finding someone with Blois's level of talent is easy enough. The reason she was where she ended up is because they found those talents, then started narrowing that field down by weeding out those without restraint — the ones who wanted to rise above being a

bodyguard, and the like. That's because a bodyguard, more than any regional feudal lord, needed to be committed to the idea that they'd sacrifice their life in the line of duty. In that sense, Blois's dad was right to feel like he was sending his daughter off to her own funeral.

"Now, can we stop with all of this? We've had plenty of depressing things to talk about for one night!"

"Yes, indeed! Why focus on all this when we finally have the whole family together?!"

Blois's parents put an end to the subject at hand. I can understand that. Their daughter is finally free from a dangerous assignment and both House Wynne and Blois seem to have bright futures. I can see why you wouldn't want to be dealing with troublesome topics while having lunch.

"Yes, indeed! Then…!"

As an Immortal, I'm good at reading people's auras and the air around them. That's why I'm in shock at what lies before me. I feel the greatest danger I've ever felt in my life.

"…Hey, Sansui, what's wrong?!"

"Papa?!"

Blois and Lain react with alarm as I freeze with a look of shock upon my face. They've never seen me look so tense in their lives.

"…Ahm, well. Mother, Father, as an Immortal I can read the weather, you see… It seems there's a storm coming. Just in case, I think it best that you take precautions — if not against the rain, then at least against the wind."

"Oh dear!"

"Yes, that's quite a problem. Let me issue the proper instructions to my servants, then. It's best if nothing happens, but better to be prepared than not."

Just as the parents start issuing instructions to the servants, the weather outside goes bad. It's not that it's started raining or that the wind's suddenly howling, but rather that the sky abruptly goes from light to dark. Thick clouds almost completely cover the sun and envelop everything in a darkness that's as black as night.

Mom and Dad are just impressed that I've successfully predicted a storm coming, but the others have noticed just how strange the situation outside was. This wasn't normal, not in any way.

"Um… Master Sansui. May I ask what's going on?" Lady Chette asks me with a look of deep concern. She's probably frightened by the fact that there's suddenly thick clouds blocking out the sun, yet there's not a drop of rain falling from the sky.

"A storm is here. That's all."

Chapter 2 — The One Who Claims the Heavens

Part 15 — Dissatisfaction

Several days after Sansui set off for Blois's family home, Saiga and his companions return to the royal capital from their journey to Tempera Village, stopping at the Batterabbe manor to give a summary of their journey to Lord Batterabbe. They report on Tempera Village rejecting Ran's return, that Tempera Village provided them with the secret texts of the five styles, and that Ran's companions were placed under the care of the Testudo Style's current master.

That they were able to pin down the location of the secret village of Rare Arts users that the great Suiboku had even struggled against was quite an accomplishment in itself. Still, the participants in the journey hardly looked pleased at the outcome. Everyone other than Eckesachs was extremely sad. Ran, in particular, was mired in regret over something that could never be taken back.

"I'm glad you've all returned," Lord Batterabbe said after hearing their report, starting by offering them words of thanks. "I know it can be exhausting to meet with those who hold you in little regard. That's particularly true if the fault lies on your own side. It was a difficult task, but you did well."

From Lord Batterabbe's point of view, the results were pretty much as he had expected. It was an encounter that held no promise of joy for either the Temperans or for the Arcanians. But to not do something because it's unpleasant is the logic of a child, and a petulant child at that. That they went as quickly as possible to pay their respects could have results worthy in and of itself, somewhere down the line.

"But... I wasn't able to do anything."

"No, that's not true. You shouldn't expect everything to go perfectly from the start. By going to pay your respects, you were able to express our desire to interact with them. If they ever feel the need to reciprocate, they might come to you to find a receptive ear."

There is an enormous difference between meeting complete strangers and renewing an acquaintance with people you've met before. After all, it's impossible to recognize or even know to visit someone that's a complete stranger versus even a passing acquaintance.

"Ran, I'm sure you know what it is you need to do now. You must continue your training, for your own sake. Set aside for a moment the machinations and interests of the adults around you."

"...Yes."

Ran's hair was its natural brown rather than her trademark silver, and right now she was just a girl with the sensitive emotions of someone her age. She had also been a berserker who, because of her world-class abilities, had never known failure, disappointment, or defeat. Lord Batterabbe deliberately chose to place the burden of training upon Ran, as

the girl struggled with a weighty past that she couldn't simply overcome using her physical strength.

"It doesn't matter that you're still demoralized or that you don't know how to atone for your sins. The only thing you can do for now is to think about how you can control yourself. If you make a mistake, we'll have no reason to hesitate."

To do nothing when you don't know what to do is the worst possible option. In fact, the moment where you're uncertain what to do is the best time to do something, *anything*. Even if it might be delaying a reckoning or just getting through that moment, even if it's pursuing a wrong path or solving the wrong problem, action is the key. Sometimes it takes wrong turn after wrong turn to finally find your way.

"Saiga. You have your promise to the Sword Apostle to uphold. Support her as best you can. If it seems she's about to make a mistake, then you must stop her. Think of that as your duty."

"…Yes, my lord."

The reason the Arcana Kingdom was willing to let Ran remain in their midst was because she had yet to claim any victims among their people. If Ran was to inflict unjustified violence upon the people of the Arcana Kingdom, then they would either banish her like Tempera Village had, or otherwise take up Sansui's recommendation and simply execute her. The important thing isn't what to do once a problem occurs. The important thing is to make sure a problem didn't happen in the first place.

"The Sword Apostle is absent at the moment, so that places a greater burden on you."

"W-Wait, really?"

"Yes. He's gone with Lain and Miss Blois to meet with House Wynne and report their engagement."

Sansui and Blois had started moving toward making their marriage a reality. There was nothing particularly surprising about that, but Saiga can't imagine what sort of married life those two would have. He doesn't know Blois very well, but he's well-acquainted with Sansui. For Sansui to act as a man rather than as a swordsman… The idea itself was hard for Saiga to imagine. Saiga wasn't alone, either; Happine, Zuger, and Sunae all felt the same way.

"The bodyguard duties that the two had been fulfilling have been taken over by Prince Tahlan."

"My brother is *her* bodyguard?!"

Douve was hated by everyone around her, and that included Sunae. For Tahlan to be Douve's bodyguard…that was hard for Sunae to accept.

"I, I see…"

At the same time, Sunae also knew that it might well be unavoidable. For her older brother, who has no claim to the throne, ending up traveling to a far-off foreign land, distinguishing himself as a swordsman, and marrying

into a powerful local family is an honorable option. It wouldn't harm the Magyan royal family, and no doubt it would make Tahlan himself happy.

"You know, Sunae, your brother has terrible taste in women."

"I agree."

Sure, it was a wonderful man who could love a woman despite her faults, but the fact that Tahlan was deeply infatuated with Douve, a woman with a truly awful personality, made me question Tahlan's taste in women. While Happine and Sunae wanted to wish him happiness, they couldn't help but think maybe Tahlan ought to explore other possibilities first.

"W-Well, anyway… Currently Prince Tahlan has also taken over Sansui's sword instruction. It's been very lively, so I suggest you go watch."

Lord Batterabbe couldn't really deny the observation made by Sunae and Happine, but it was also true that the actual couple in question seemed rather happy and were finding fulfillment in their day to day lives.

There was a plot of land near the Academy that the Regent had lent out to Sansui to use as a training ground. The training grounds originally had students and faculty members participating in the daily lessons, but now it was populated solely by those who were serious about the craft of swordsmanship.

"Wow, that's really impressive…"

Although all they were doing was taking practice swings, there was a group of men who were shouting at the top of their lungs, as though they were actually in combat. Another section had men who, though wearing protective equipment, were busily trying to beat their sparring opponents down with all their might. Almost all of those present had blood running down the grips of their wooden swords. They were bleeding from their palms as they firmly gripped their wooden swords. This was no longer a space where people who were there for mere "lessons" in swordplay could come visit.

"P-Pretty sure it wasn't quite this intense when I was last here… Why's everyone more motivated without Sansui around?"

Happine's observation was correct: the training grounds were rather more peaceful when Sansui was present. While they had all been receiving Sansui's instruction, no one at the time had seemed so invested in the sparring that they looked ready to bludgeon their sparring partners to death.

"They've started to take on the air of elite soldiers. All worthy of men who've been training with my brother."

Sunae had studied the fighting arts herself. She had seen similar sights in her homeland and wasn't particularly intimidated by the scene before her. That was also why she knew the difference in the atmosphere around a group of common soldiers and the one around a group of elite soldiers. Even if they were doing the same exercises, the air was completely different. The

swordsmen who had received Sansui's instruction had definitely achieved that kind of eliteness.

"A-Ah, so where is Prince Tahlan, anyway...?"

Zuger, who was the most intimidated by the ruthless atmosphere, started searching for Tahlan, all the while doing her best to avoid looking too closely at the practicing swordsmen.

"He's over there."

Like Sunae, Ran was completely unfazed by the display and quickly found Tahlan among the throng. Tahlan, who was roughly the equivalent of an assistant instructor, was busy sparring with other students. He was perhaps a step or two further along in his training than the others and it showed. Despite the fact that the entire area was taken up by bloodthirsty fighters, Tahlan still seemed a man among boys.

"...There she is."

Happine had also located Tahlan, and at the same time she had found Douve, who sat elegantly watching the practice as the men quite literally sweated blood.

"...Wow."

Douve seemed completely unflappable, wearing the same faintly mocking smile as usual; that arrogant little smirk that seemed to hold everyone she looked upon in contempt. The situation hadn't dulled her attitude in the least, and if anything, the contrast made her unflinching confidence stand out all the more.

Zuger let out an astonished murmur of respect at what was, honestly, a remarkable display of nonchalance. Of course, the sentence, had Zuger completed it, would have been along the lines of, "Wow, she's really a piece of work."

"...Seems everyone's busy right now, so why don't we go talk with Miss Douve."

None of them wanted to approach her, but they were also hesitant about talking to anyone else. In that sense, the only one who wasn't occupied at present here was Douve. And she was probably the only one who would happily engage them in conversation. Now, whether or not the group could stand listening to Douve's side of the conversation was another matter entirely.

"Oh, you've returned?"

"Yes, we just got back."

Douve, who appeared to be in a remarkable good mood, greeted Happine without taunting her. But Douve's gaze remained fixed on Tahlan, who was busy practicing his swordcraft.

"They're certainly enthusiastic."

"Yes, the boys are being boys, aren't they?"

All of them were fully immersed in their training, buckling down despite the strain on their bodies. The intensity of their training showed how seriously they approached their craft and how they were all fully committed

to the effort. It was hard to understand where that motivation came from, given that they weren't at war.

"You didn't spur them on by saying something ridiculous, did you?"

"Don't be silly. They wouldn't be this motivated even if I set them to it."

"True."

The Batterabbe party nodded in agreement at her comment. No matter how much Douve taunted them, she wouldn't have been able to raise their morale like that. With her terrible personality and her penchant for constantly mocking people, she isn't capable of positive motivation. That she's well aware of this is perhaps a good encapsulation of Douve's character.

"You may have heard, but Sansui is going to transition from his role as my bodyguard to being a battle instructor. With that done, Tahlan will become my new bodyguard, and he'll be hiring his subordinates from among the people here. Of course, it won't be all of them. Just the select few that meet his criteria."

Douve wasn't saying anything strange, but the others couldn't quite follow her explanation. She had just clearly declared that she wasn't behind their motivation, so they weren't training for the purpose of becoming her bodyguards

Thinking about it, it's pretty impressive that she goes out of her way to get people to resent her when she's so self-aware about it.

Saiga felt another prickle of discomfort at Douve's words, but they didn't do anything to answer his question.

"So, why are they working so hard?" Ran asked rather bluntly, likely because she didn't have any particular connection with Douve.

Douve looked at Ran and said, smiling, "Oh, for you of all people to ask."

Ran realized she was being mocked, but she kept her in anger in check as she understood what Douve was implying. If Ran were to go on a rampage here, she'd be spitting not just in Saiga's face, but in those of her Temperan friends.

"Recall that my bodyguard Sansui made you cry in public?"

"Yeah, I couldn't do a thing to stop him."

Ran had an overwhelming advantage in physical ability and their skills were about equal. Yet, in spite of those disadvantages, Sansui had combined his Immortal Arts and tactics, along with his restraint, to easily defeat her.

"Sansui is strong, but he's so strong that there's no one that can match him in a duel. He doesn't have many opportunities to fight in front of people, so it was his duel with you that spread his name far and wide."

"And?"

"It means that Sansui's students are all looked upon with high expectations from those around them. After all, Sansui is strong. People would naturally expect the same from his students."

Douve had explained enough that the others could now reach the natural conclusion. The students all felt the pressure of being Sansui's students and were, in fact, desperate to show results.

"Sansui is evidently also good at teaching, so those swordsmen have actually gotten stronger. They even recently distinguished themselves in actual combat. Unfortunately, they're not as strong as people expect them to be."

In a way, those unrealistic expectations were unavoidable, and no matter how hard the swordsmen here practiced, they wouldn't ever catch up to Sansui. If desperate amounts of effort were enough, Sansui wouldn't have needed to spend five hundred years training.

"You see, how these swordsmen perform in their jobs around the Sepaeda territories will determine Sansui's reputation. If a student of Sansui is defeated by some random challenger, that's a stain on Sansui's honor."

No matter how strong Sansui was, he couldn't fight in front of everyone in the kingdom. The people out in the rural regions would only witness his skills through those of his students. If they ended up just being a little stronger than average, then that would damage Sansui's reputation. Sansui himself probably wouldn't care, but the students themselves were another matter.

"The swordsmen here all deeply respect Sansui. He's as strong as the stories say he is, he's kind to other swordsmen, and in the end, he even found work for them. For them to bring harm to Sansui's reputation with their own failures is something they want to avoid at all costs. That's why they're so motivated."

The party then took the time to look over the swordsmen and their intense approach to training. They were putting in the effort not just for themselves, but for Sansui's sake. It was a sign of respect and admiration for their master.

"It's not meaningless, but their goal is unattainable," Douve said, then turned her gaze back to Tahlan. She watched the swordsman who was known to be peerless back in his homeland as he continued to defeat swordsmen that tried desperately to keep up with him.

"It's not like they can ever hope to gain the unfair level of skill that Sansui possesses. Worse, they aren't able to beat anyone with truly exceptional abilities. At most, their personal ceilings are as first-class swordsmen."

The Royal Guardsmen who were there in disguise were, like Tahlan, easily overwhelming the other swordsmen. They were able to do so with just their skill with the blade, without the use of any magic whatsoever.

"All of the first-rate swordsmen in the world put in about that much effort. It's a bit presumptuous to think they can get better than that just because they're being taught by Sansui."

"You're mocking them when you say that."

“Oh? All I’ve done is lay out the facts. You’re awfully cynical, aren’t you?”

None of the party could be completely certain, but Douve’s observations were probably true. The swordsmen who were putting in all that intense effort in front of them were frustrated that their best efforts weren’t enough, yet they were able to maintain their dedication without letting that frustration fester.

“Then again, there are people in this world who think a month of intense effort is enough to beat the kingdom’s greatest swordsman.”

“Urk!”

The truth stabbed deeply at Saiga, Happine, Zuger, and Sunae. Saiga and his harem hadn’t realized this at the time, as they were too caught up in their own misery, but they had been incredibly presumptuous in assuming that the one month of effort was enough to overcome Sansui’s strength.

“I’m actually rather fond of these swordsmen. To dismiss those who are doing their best, despite being rather ordinary in talent...isn’t an attitude worthy of a martial House.”

Douve’s teasing was focused entirely on Saiga and Ran.

“Although I’m sure that’s not something you two, with your overwhelming amounts of talent, can understand. After all, not everyone can learn any Rare Art that they want, nor can they be born with an absurd amount of Tainted Blood. That said, I suppose being humiliated by relying solely on that talent is something only the two of you can understand.”

There were times that people couldn’t admit defeat because they were viewed objectively as having a great deal of talent. In that sense, Saiga and Ran were connected by a common thread. But having Douve put that fact into words made it unbearably painful.

“Oh, alright, alright! Your bodyguard is amazing! You were lucky to be able to find a perfect swordsman for yourself!”

Having had enough, Happine went on to thoroughly praise Sansui while offering no praise for his master, Douve.

Hearing those words, Douve’s expression went from cheerful to troubled.

“Perfect, mm?”

She was thinking about the absent swordsman, who had protected her since childhood.

“Say, did you bring Eckesachs with you?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

Eckesachs, who had been carried on Saiga’s back, turned from her sword form to her human form and continued speaking out loud.

“What is it?”

“...It might contradict what I was saying earlier, but...”

What came to Douve’s mind was Sansui’s habit of continually putting himself down whenever the subject was about his own skill.

“I...no, *we* can’t imagine a swordsman who surpasses Sansui.”

No matter how much those around him were to praise him, Sansui was quick to point out that he was nothing compared to his master, Suiboku. No matter where he was, no matter who he defeated, no matter how many he defeated, Sansui had constantly said he was nothing compared to his master. The overwhelmingly powerful swordsman had far too low of an opinion of himself. She wanted the swordsman that served House Sepaeda to have a bit more confidence in his skill.

"Is Master Suiboku, Sansui's master... Is he that much stronger than Sansui?"

Given how strong Sansui was, no doubt Suiboku was quite powerful as well. Everyone believed that. Applying the logic from earlier, Sansui had always protected Suiboku's reputation and honor. But Sansui was far too strong by mortal standards. Not only was there no one who could defeat him one-on-one, but even the Royal Guardsmen, the elite of the elite, couldn't beat him when fighting him all at once.

"I sometimes end up thinking, could it actually be that Sansui is...the strongest in the world?"

It was perhaps less a question and more of a hope. It was the presumptuous wish of the privileged princess wanting the loyal swordsman who served her to be the greatest in the world.

"Douve..."

But, Happine felt a certain amount of pity for Douve at that moment. She appeared less like a master who had complaints about a servant and more like a younger sister who wished her older brother would behave a little better. That seemed to be how Douve regarded Sansui.

"Suiboku and Sansui, which is the stronger one?"

The swordsmen present had all paused in their training. The question that Douve had asked was one that all of Sansui's students had wondered about in their hearts, and so they awaited Eckesachs's words, the words of the legendary sword that had once been wielded by Suiboku himself.

"Sansui, at present, might be a superior swordsman to the Suiboku I knew."

Everyone present heard the ultimate legendary sword's voice.

"But there is no way for me to measure just how strong Suiboku is at present. It pains me to admit it, but I couldn't even get the full measure of Sansui's strength."

Despite her immense body of experience, Eckesachs had misjudged Sansui's skill with the sword. That misjudgment had led to her current master, Saiga, suffering a humiliating defeat at Sansui's hands. Even she could no longer properly grasp the full extent of Sansui's ability.

"However, there is one thing that I know for certain. That the one who knows the current Suiboku best is Sansui himself."

Even when he was raw and unpolished, Suiboku had been the Immortal so powerful that even God had feared him. While Sansui knew nothing

about Suiboku from that era, he was the one who knew the current Suiboku best.

“If that Sansui says that he can’t defeat him, no matter what he tries, there’s no reason to doubt him.”

In terms of judging combat ability, Sansui was almost unnecessarily honest. Such was his honesty that when he had defeated the kingdom’s greatest swordsman, the Lightning Knight, he had inadvertently said that he could also beat the entire Royal Guard at once.

“Suiboku’s strength is likely far beyond anything we could imagine.”

There was a certain credibility to Eckesachs’s words. Given Sansui’s typical straightforward honesty, it was almost certainly not flattery when he spoke about Suiboku. Of course, that didn’t mean that everyone could accept those words at face value.

“Honestly, I can’t believe it,” Ran said, expressing her dissatisfaction.

“Back where I come from, Suiboku’s treated like a god, and the Testudo Style users who can view the past were completely frightened by him. But, having actually fought Sansui…I think he’s still the strongest.”

While none of them would say it out loud, they all couldn’t help but agree. They didn’t want to believe Eckesachs. They understood it was rude to not believe her after asking her directly, but they simply couldn’t accept it.

Individuals were called the strongest because the ones calling them that couldn’t imagine anyone that could surpass them. Even if Sansui, the very embodiment of that level of strength, claimed otherwise, no one wanted to doubt his strength.

“Sorry for asking such an odd question.”

Douve’s expression looked faintly sad for a moment, and then she turned away from Eckesachs.

Part 16 — Warning

Saiga lay down in his bed in the House Batterabbe estate in the royal capital, reading through a translated copy of the Book of Secret Techniques given to him at Tempera Village. While he couldn't read the original books himself, he was fortunate that Eckesachs could and had translated them on the way back to the capital.

"Hrrm."

The five secret books that contained the methods of learning Rare Arts were items that the Regent would drool over. However, though Saiga kept flipping through them, he couldn't seem to get the contents to stick in his memory.

"Mm…"

Saiga was on the verge of a breakthrough. With his ability to learn all of the Rare Arts, the more Rare Arts he learned, the stronger he became. Combined with the power of the Marked he had learned from Ran, that meant he was about to learn five new Rare Arts, as well as refine what had been his limited understanding of divination. This was going to vastly expand his range of possible tactics.

"…You know, this really is just cheating."

Unlike Sansui's students, Saiga was already far beyond the norm in terms of strength, and it was guaranteed that he'd continue his remarkable growth in the years to come. That was because he had been given a cheat ability by God, which is originally how he'd wanted it.

The reason that Saiga's spirits were low in spite of that overwhelming advantage was because Saiga had realized just how shallow he had been. He couldn't help but feel ashamed when he compared himself to the people who were continuing their training despite knowing there was a wall they could never overcome.

"But I still need to get stronger."

It's true that he now had a feeling of inferiority and shame, but he didn't have the choice of just quitting. Saiga was the heir to House Batterabbe, and he wasn't allowed to take a break from his training just because he was depressed. Even if it was unpleasant, even if it was embarrassing, he needed to do his best. He wasn't allowed to take solace in who he was at the moment; instead, he needed to keep aiming ever higher.

"I'm the ace of House Batterabbe. I need to at least get to where people can compare me to Sansui."

If one was supposed to continue their efforts even when it was painful, one should also continue their efforts even when they didn't want to. He needed to become strong enough to defeat whoever came at him, no matter their numbers. He needed to be strong enough to take on an entire army on his own. He didn't think there would be opponents at the level of Sansui or Suiboku appearing any time in the near future, but there was a fair chance that he'd end up fighting several hundred or several thousand opponents at

once. It wasn't the best phrasing, but there was no point in him comparing himself to Sansui's students.

"Let's see... Celestial Blood, Testudo Style..."

It's not that he was motivated to learn, exactly, but he pushed himself to study from a sense of duty. He decided that he'd start with learning more about precognition, given that he had a basic grounding in it already.

"This is a martial art that can only be wielded by those with the Celestial Blood... Wait, there's nothing about the art itself here."

In the Tempera Village, they had combined magical and physical techniques into a single martial arts style. Which is why the Book of Secrets containing Tempera Village's martial arts placed much of the emphasis on physical techniques. There was page after page of extremely advanced physical maneuvers that were made possible by the fact that the wielder was equipped with precognition. There were also training methods for acquiring them, but he had seen these things before. They were all techniques that Sansui had learned and used as part of his own fighting style.

"Looking at this, I guess the Testudo Style is similar to how Sansui and Ran fight."

It appeared to be a style that had little in the way of direct offensive or defensive powers, but rather was focused on maintaining a certain level of breathing room to deal with an opponent's actions.

"...You know, I hate to say this, but Eckesachs probably wasted her time translating this."

Saiga could learn arts other than divination, which could directly reinforce his attack and defense. Since time was a limited commodity, he needed to consider efficiency, as well.

"How to improve the accuracy of one's precognition and decrease the burn rate of the Celestial Blood... Yeah, this is what I wanted."

Reading further along, the second half had a fair amount of information on the magical parts of the Rare Art. Given that Saiga, unlike Shouzo, had a limited pool of power to call upon, this was what Saiga was hoping to find.

"'Either change something yourself or make your opponent do it. Don't ever try to do both at once, as it'll rapidly deplete your Celestial Blood.'"

The difference wasn't in changing how the precognition itself worked, but on how to employ it. It wasn't a lesson on advanced techniques, but that was exactly what made it immediately useful for him.

"'What can be said for both methods is that it's best to draw in the opponent and simplify the number of potential moves they can make. By purposefully leaving your head exposed, the enemy will naturally target your head. Then, determining the distance between the opponent and oneself will allow one to adjust whether or not they will punch, kick, charge in, or approach slowly. It's a key to battle that can even be employed once one's Celestial Blood is fully depleted.'"

The contents were similar to what Sansui had taught him. It seemed that reading an opponent's moves was based on the same principles even with the power of precognition.

"'One must not think about finding the way to defeat the enemy. One should first decide how exactly they will defeat the enemy, then use their precognition to achieve that end.'"

It was extraordinarily useful information for Saiga, given his ability to wield other types of Arts.

"'For example, when fighting an opponent in full armor, one might seek to grapple them and slip a blade between their armor. One must first look at the enemy and analyze their equipment and movement, and then decide upon the form to employ. Only then should one employ precognition to find the necessary timing. One must not, during this time, look for multiple methods to accomplish that goal. With the exception of situations where one's precognition informs them of an extremely dangerous potential outcome that they had not anticipated, it is best if one focuses on finding the timing to make a single method work.'"

To summarize, it was better to look for the opportunity to have one method succeed rather than look for which method would work best.

"'The most information one gathers with precognition is in one's field of vision. One can avoid putting oneself in danger by working to keep the opponent's entire body in one's field of view. It is dangerous to be in a situation similar to being in checkmate, where one's actions make no difference in the inevitable outcome.'"

This brought back a particularly bitter memory for Saiga. When he had fought Sansui after acquiring Eckesachs, Sansui had moved out of his field of vision, then flipped him over. Once Saiga was on his back with a blade placed against his throat, there was nothing he could do to improve the situation. It epitomized what the book defined as danger. Sansui had acted on conjecture rather than certain knowledge about precognition, but he had understood its limitations perfectly and executed the best way to defeat it.

It was the same when Sansui fought Ran. Sansui's observation skills and his ability to craft tactics to best suit the situation were so good that a casual observer might think Sansui was capable of precognition himself.

"I wonder if Sansui's capable of reading an opponent at a level several steps beyond the Testudo Style..."

The more he read the Book of Secrets, the more Saiga was convinced that the Testudo Style was basically doing a slightly inferior version of what Sansui did ordinarily and used a Rare Art to improve its accuracy. Of course, that's not all it was, but this realization was enough to remind Saiga of just how skilled Sansui was.

"Well, I can't exactly put five hundred years into training, so I guess I should just do what I can."

He thought back to how Sansui would cleanly and completely take down his opponent without letting them have even the slightest chance of

matching him. For Saiga, who had to learn how to defeat a large number of enemies, Sansui's style would be ideal. But if it took five hundred years to reach that level, then Saiga couldn't bring himself to even attempt it, and it was probably wrong to try.

"Mm? It's changed subjects again."

As he continued reading, the book switched tacks yet again.

"'The Testudo Style practitioner's responsibility includes determining the village's guiding policies. One should not let the ability to see the future cloud their judgment. That ability doesn't confer omniscience. It is just as important for one to peer into the past and learn lessons from what has gone before. If one were to imagine what could happen based upon those lessons, one can avoid most forms of destruction without resorting to the use of precognition. As for completely unavoidable disasters, one only has the option to flee.'"

The disaster that befell the village in the distant past was, without a doubt, Suiboku.

"'Always bear this in mind: if there is even the slightest chance of victory, the Testudo Style can find it. However, the only thing to do in a battle with no chance of victory is to flee.'"

This was probably an artifact from the time the villagers made their living serving as mercenaries. The idea that one should run if they couldn't win is a fundamental truth of sorts.

"'Don't engage in battles that can't be won. For battles that cannot be avoided, reduce your losses as much as possible. There is no reason to dismiss the importance of knowing when to flee, for it is a strength of the Testudo Style. Simply worrying about how impressive one's fighting style appears is the act of a fool.'"

It was a philosophy that was far from being described as the philosophy of the strongest, but it was a blunt warning that had been included because this was a Book of Secrets.

"'Do not ever associate with Immortals.'"

The book then offered simple warnings.

"'The Immortals do not wield martial arts, they wield the power of the gods. They wield a power that is far beyond the understanding of mere humans, capable of splitting the earth and heavens and making it obey their will. Angering an Immortal will not simply result in death. There will be nothing left in the wake of an Immortal's rage.'"

Saiga found his throat was suddenly dry.

"'Do not dismiss the dreams you see at night. They are omens of destruction that cannot be avoided. The dreams that a Testudo Style wielder sees at night are the most certain of all messages concerning the future.'"

The Testudo Style, and precognition generally, expends more energy the further into the future its wielder tries to see. In addition, the further into the future the precognition goes, the less accurate the read will be.

However, prophetic dreams that occur without the wielder's conscious intent could, at times, peer far into the future, sometimes several years ahead. And in most cases, such dreams showed disastrous events.

"'...Do not turn away from despair. But do not try to resist, do not get involved. Flee, hide, and endure. Even if one can see the future, one cannot stop a true disaster. It is impossible for humans to do so.'"

It was after reaching this point in the Book of Secrets that Saiga finally understood why precognition, an art that had first started in the territory now occupied by the Arcana Kingdom, had disappeared into an artifact in the history books by the time he had arrived.

"W-Well, it'll be fine! Master Suiboku won't go on rampages anymore, and we've got the Eight Sacred Treasures! There's no despair awaiting the Arcana Kingdom!"

He tried to convince himself that everything was fine and that he should go to bed, but he couldn't shake the bad feeling that hovered over him. He felt that, if he fell asleep now, he'd have a bad dream. It wasn't the sense that he'd have a nightmare, exactly but that he'd witness a prophecy of disaster. For Saiga, even closing his eyes wound up being an act of courage.

"And then you proceeded to have a nightmare?"

"Yes, it was a terrible dream."

When Saiga woke up the next morning, he was haunted by what he had seen in his sleep. The prophetic dream that he'd seen because he'd learned the art of precognition was clearly not just a dream. The contents of the dream were something he couldn't ignore, and so Saiga had decided to explain it to Lord Batterabbe.

"A prophetic dream..."

The greatest trait of the Rare Art known as precognition was that it had absolutely no effect on anyone other than the wielder themselves. As such, it appeared to other people as though the wielder was simply troubled by a strange dream. At the very least, it was impossible for most people to take action based solely on someone else's prophetic dream. But Saiga's expression was deathly serious.

"I know it might be hard to believe."

Saiga himself knew he sounded crazy. He could understand why Lord Batterabbe couldn't bring himself to believe him. Despite that knowledge, it was still hard for him to face such a skeptical look.

"No, I believe you. While I can't act in my capacity as a noble lord on that basis, I can believe you as your father-in-law. Tell me what you saw, in as much detail as possible."

"Thank you. I didn't see very much in the dream, it was more of a brief scene..."

Saiga carefully explained the information that was seared into his mind.

"In the Caputo Territories, where Shouzo had 'plowed' the land, there was a man I'd never seen before, under such thick cloud cover that I

couldn’t tell if it was day or night. In his hand this man held Vajra, the Divine Spear.”

It was a simple description of what he had seen, but it was enough to make Lord Batterabbe pale.

“Someone had taken Vajra and come to Arcana?”

“Yes, I believe that is the case.”

The land that Shouzo had plowed was impossible to mistake for any other place in the world. Further, Saiga had seen Vajra with his own eyes. From that, it was easy enough to guess that the thick cloud cover, which had made it impossible to tell if it was day or night, must have been caused by Vajra’s power.

“The current owner of Vajra is Ukyou, leader of our ally, the Domino Republic. The fact that someone was able to take the Divine Spear from him is an enormous problem in and of itself. It could very well mean that he and those around him — such as Her Highness — could have fallen victim to that attacker.”

While it was hard to think that Ukyou, the possessor of Elixir, would actually die, there was the possibility that those around him wouldn’t be so lucky. Princess Setenve had Royal Guardsmen as an escort, of course, but there was the possibility that they’d been defeated as well.

“Further... If the man possessing Vajra holds a grudge against the Arcana Kingdom, the damage he could do is incalculable.”

The Divine Spear of Rebellion, Vajra, had the ability to control the weather, and it was possible to use it to create natural disasters such as massive storms.

“Ukyou invaded our kingdom because he needed to steal to feed his people. Had he indiscriminately attacked our kingdom by controlling the weather and destroyed our defenses with storms, there would have been little for him to steal, and it would have made advancing and retreating more difficult. Moreover, he held no anger in his heart against our kingdom. That’s why that wasn’t a threat we faced at the time, but...”

“If it’s someone related to the Domino Empire’s imperial house or their nobility...”

“Precisely. If it’s someone who resents Domino’s new government or our kingdom, they may very well resort to indiscriminate destruction.”

Lord Batterabbe and Saiga are both aware that they were hated by the members of Domino’s old regime. Not only were they hated, but the hatred was of an enormous, country-sized scale.

Ukyou had brought down the Domino Empire, then captured and executed the entire imperial house. Further, the Arcana Kingdom had handed over all of the nobles who had defected from the Domino Empire. The kingdom had thus acquired Domino as a satellite state. It would be absurd to expect no one to resent them for it.

“I know I’m the one who had the dream, but is there really anyone among the old regime who has that sort of ability?”

“I can’t rule it out completely. It’s a terrible possibility, but it’s also the worst scenario that we can imagine. At the very least, there’s a need to confirm or refute it.”

It would be ideal if there was some method to communicate quickly over long distances, but such methods don’t exist in this world, which was why there was no other way to check on the situation without sending someone to check in person at top speed.

“I want you to go to Domino through the Caputo territories. Of course, the best result would be if nothing has happened, but you can at least confirm where Vajra currently is.”

“Understood… Um, should I go alone?”

Lord Batterabbe, sitting opposite his heir, looked at the younger man. Saiga appeared extremely anxious, as though he really didn’t want to go by himself.

…I can’t let him go by himself.

It’s perhaps a bit late to mention this, but Saiga had never traveled alone in this world. Travel in this world required a certain amount of knowledge, experience, equipment, and technique. It wasn’t like Japan, where a child could reach their destination so long as they continued to take the right public transportation. It wasn’t as though there were any accurate maps of the world, and there wasn’t any convenient signage, either.

There also wasn’t any way to ask for directions if the traveler got lost. This was because the Arcana Kingdom’s population wasn’t evenly distributed throughout the kingdom, and consequently there were large tracts of uninhabited land. The possibility existed not simply of being extremely late, but of going missing entirely.

If all he needs to do is get where he’s going, all I have to do is place a few escorts with him, but…

Lord Batterabbe had a decent understanding of Saiga’s personality. While the young man before him was quite powerful, he was also still emotionally immature. Those around him would worry if he could handle the mission by himself, and he himself would be even more worried than them.

More than anything, Saiga was the heir to House Batterabbe. He was much higher-ranked than a retainer like Sansui, and as such, any offense he might cause would have substantially greater consequences.

I want to send Happine with him, but…there could very well be combat on the way. Considering that the opponent might be someone with more skill than the Royal Guard, Saiga alone might be caught unprepared.

There was also the possibility of failure. As Lord Batterabbe considered the potential worst-case scenarios, he couldn’t help but bring a certain man to mind.

If the Sword Apostle was here, it would be an easy choice.

The Sword Apostle was by far the most reliable out of the four powerful aces. If Lord Batterabbe could send Sansui and his polished, perfected skill

with Saiga, there would be no possibility of failure. But Sansui was currently on vacation. He wasn't available.

No, that would be disrespectful to Saiga, as well. Especially as I had just told him I would believe in him. He's trying his best.

Lord Batterabbe put aside the slight temptation to take the easy route out and provided instructions to his heir and successor.

"I can't send you alone. There's the matter of Ran, for one thing."

"Y-You're correct... Keeping Ran in line is my role, after all."

"Then it would be best for you and Ran to move together."

As a berserker, there were plenty of concerns about Ran on a day-to-day basis, but in a fight with only a handful of people involved, she could probably handle herself.

"However, with just you and Ran, while there's probably no issue in terms of combat, there's still the potential of a political incident. At the very least, take Happine with you. And...take Tahlan and the Sword Apostle's students with you, also. I'll speak to House Sepaeda and settle the matter with them."

"U-Understood."

"If you run into the opponent who's stolen Vajra and you decide he's beyond your capabilities, you have my full permission to run. I'll prepare for the worst and recommend deploying the final ace."

Fortunately for them, perhaps, the Arcana Kingdom had more aces up its collective sleeve than just the Young Sword Apostle.

Lord Batterabbe's expression was tense, but there was no hint of despair in that tension.

"...The final ace."

"Yes... Though I'd rather not have to use him."

Rather than despair, Lord Batterabbe's expression suggested hesitation. It was a dark emotion resembling fear, the hesitation at having to rely upon something he would much rather not use, if at all possible.

Part 17 — Cloudy Skies

So it was that the House Batterabbe and House Sepaeda parties departed for the Caputo territories. The groups traveled in a caravan consisting of two lavishly decorated carriages with several dozen mounted warriors as an escort. The caravan appeared to be in something of a hurry, and the escorting warriors weren't particularly well equipped. At first glance their weapons and armor hardly seemed worthy of guarding members of the Great Houses.

However, all of those wearing the equipment were stoutly built and, with their serious expressions, left little doubt that they were skilled elites. Given that they were commanded by Royal Guardsmen who were undercover as simple mercenaries, the caravan's defenses were meticulously organized, with no apparent weaknesses. While they were hardly an field army in sheer numbers, the mood among the members of the caravan was that of a battalion headed to war.

"Well, we certainly didn't have much time to relax," Happine said with a tired sigh, slumping in her carriage seat.

Her reaction was perfectly understandable. The Batterabbe party had only just returned from their journey to and from Tempera Village, only to be bundled into another carriage the very next day. They had been forced to set off on their current journey just as they were all prepared to relax and recuperate from their previous trip.

"You could have stayed behind if you didn't want to come. I mean, Saiga and I are more than enough to handle this," Ran said rather bluntly to the worn Happine.

Surprisingly, Ran wasn't trying to be insulting; it was just that she simply didn't understand the need for such a large caravan in the first place. Ran had yet to truly grasp the physical size of the world, and didn't understand how difficult it was to arrive at a distant location without getting lost, or the political headaches that could accompany such a journey. More than anything else, she didn't understand the point of the men accompanying them. Why were men who were weaker than her acting as her escort?

"H-How dare you!"

"Ran, be silent," Sunae said, cutting Happine's angry retort off while admonishing Ran. "Those soldiers aren't here to protect you, but rather to protect Douve and Happine. Or what? Do you intend to protect them as well?"

"I see." At that explanation Ran didn't bat an eye and simply nodded in acceptance.

"Happine, you shouldn't be complaining, either. House Batterabbe is a martial house, is it not?"

"Y-You don't have to tell me that!"

Ran's acceptance was limited to the presence of the escorting soldiers — it didn't extend to Happine, which was why she snickered at Sunae's sarcastic quip.

"Vajra might have been stolen, right? That's a serious issue for the Arcana Kingdom! Of course I should be going with you!"

"Um, about that... If Vajra's really been taken, are we sure Domino will be alright?"

Zuger's concern was only natural. Given that Vajra was owned by Domino's ruler, Ukyou, that would mean that someone had attacked Ukyou and taken Vajra from him by force. That was already an enormous problem in and of itself, but it was well within the realm of possibility that the individual who had taken Vajra might also aim to destroy the Domino Republic. It seemed plausible for the émigré nobles, men and women like Nuri, to go to such extreme lengths to salve their wounded pride.

"What do you think, Eckesachs?"

"I don't think there's that much to worry about." Eckesachs replied to Saiga's query, sounding relatively optimistic. "Vajra can control the weather, but she can't create it out of nothing. To create enough clouds to cover an entire kingdom, her wielder would have to go all the way to the sea, then bring the clouds back to the kingdom to make it rain there. That would take a substantial amount of time."

"If it takes that long, maybe it's a bit further into the future."

Even though this world had no rapid communication methods like telephones, Domino could still send word of an attack against Ukyou using mounted messengers and the like. Given that they hadn't sent such a message yet, and that no other word of dark clouds had been forthcoming, it meant that either Vajra had yet to be taken or had just been taken.

"But the Testudo Style's prophetic dreams are about events that can't be avoided. Since we're on the way to Caputo or whatever, we'll probably arrive right as that's happening," Ran said; she didn't know much about Vajra, but seemed to think that the events were already in motion.

To that, Eckesachs replied with a touch of irritation, "Were you not listening? I was explaining to you that it's impossible as..."

"Beg your pardon, Lady Happine!" A Royal Guardsman anxiously opened the door to the carriage.

He wasn't the only one showing anxiety. All of those escorting the carriage — indeed, everyone who wasn't inside the carriage — seemed in a panic.

"Dark clouds are gathering on the horizon and heading this way!"

"What?!"

Eckesachs leapt out of the carriage first, and the others followed her out the door.

Once outside of the carriage, the group looked eastward in the direction they were headed. The eastern sky was covered with a layer of black clouds.

It was though there was a giant black wall in the sky, and it was steadily coming closer.

"That can't be..."

The carriage and the mounted escort all stopped moving. Everyone there could only stare up at the sky in shock. It was precisely because they knew about the Divine Spear Vajra's powers that the sight before them was so frightening. As Vajra herself had boasted, her powers belonged to the realm of the gods, and were far beyond anything that mere humans could fight against. Even Ran was speechless, staring in shock as the clouds approached.

"Just what is going on here...?" Eckesachs's murmur sent a shiver up Saiga's spine as he remembered the images from his dream.

"The man holding Vajra... He seemed extremely powerful..."

It was impossible to do this much with just Vajra's powers. The one who had taken Vajra from Ukyou was a monster of untold strength.

"So powerful that I don't stand a chance against him by myself."

The reason Saiga had been frightened in front of Lord Batterabbe wasn't because of the various minor complications or any potential mishaps. Simply put, it was because Saiga had felt he couldn't defeat this opponent by himself.

"...Everyone," Saiga said, looking at everyone who had stopped in place.

Not just Ran and Tahlan, but to Sunae, the Royal Guardsmen, and Sansui's students. He looked upon the faces of each warrior, who despite their anxiety, their fear, all had the same expression upon their features. Saiga then looked to Eckesachs, the Ultimate Legendary Sword.

"...Let's hurry. To Caputo."

He turned Eckesachs into a sword and pointed her in the direction of the clouds.

"We have to protect the Arcana Kingdom."

The young swordsman wanted nothing more to turn from the clouds at his back and run. He didn't bother to hide the fear on his face, but in spite of that fear, he still proposed moving onward.

At Saiga's direction, the warriors steeled themselves. They nodded to one another, remounting their horses to set out once more. They now all understood what had driven Saiga's anxiety, what he had been seeking, and what he had overcome to move forward. The warriors hadn't exactly been lacking in urgency before, but now they were re-energized with a fresh sense of urgency. Their morale was as high as it could be as they set out again toward the clouds.

"Looks like Saiga's finally grown up a bit."

Douve, returning to her carriage, showed no sign of running and, if anything, chuckled in amusement as she turned to gaze upon Tahlan, who rejoined her in the carriage. Tahlan, who had always looked dignified and strong, was now unable to contain a child-like excitement as he looked out toward the horizon. Douve looked affectionately at him, smiling happily.

“Yes, indeed.”

Tahlan hadn’t been overwhelmed by despair, nor was he looking upon the situation lightly. But as a man, he felt a deep joy at being able to face an enemy that threatened the Arcana Kingdom.

“Everyone here is underestimating Saiga. They all have their doubts about him and wish Master Sansui were here. Even Saiga himself feels that way.”

No matter how one looked at the situation, they were facing a danger to the entire kingdom. Saiga’s prophetic dream was correct, with no possibility for error remaining. That being so, they should have sent the kingdom’s greatest asset against the enemy: the ultimate swordsman, the one man that it was impossible to imagine ever losing. They could all believe that he would be able to do something about the situation.

But that would simply be fleeing in the face of the enemy. It would be one thing to retreat to bring back information about the enemy, but Lord Batterabbe was already aware of the contents of Saiga’s prophetic dream, and the dark clouds that were spreading through the sky would send the message far more quickly than even the fastest horse.

There was no tactical reason for Saiga to retreat, but still, his heart wanted to run. Panicked flight, rather than strategic retreat, was what crossed his mind. That was, without a doubt, a sign of his weakness. But because it was a weakness, Saiga was able to overcome it. Because Saiga was the strongest warrior present, he needed to lead the others by example.

“If we were to simply run away here, all we’d have left to ourselves are our lives. If we run because we’re frightened of the enemy before us, we’ll lose what it *means* to live.”

To run away without doing anything, while leaving everything to the ultimate swordsman, the man who was guaranteed to succeed... Even if they survived, those who had fled wouldn’t have much to live for afterward. Almost everyone present here had lost to Sansui at some point, but that wasn’t all they were. They had lost to Sansui, yes, but they had also made the effort to dust themselves off and stand up again after their loss.

“Better to die a warrior than live as a coward, mm?”

“Exactly.”

Douve herself was as much at risk of dying as any of the others. Despite that risk, she maintained her usual attitude, because she knew just how pathetic it was to discard all pride for the sake of simply clinging to one’s own life. She was different from the likes of Nuri and the émigré nobles, all of whom had done exactly that. Only the weak thought they could earn respect without risking their lives in some way.

“There’s a part of me that’s glad Master Sansui isn’t here. If Master Sansui was here, after all, we might not have a role to play in any of this.”

The warriors present wanted to be proud of their lives. They wanted to put in the effort to get stronger, fight through the danger, and gain the glory that came from all of that. Even if they couldn’t become the strongest

swordsmen in the world, they still wanted to be proper swordsmen in their own right. The opportunity to prove themselves had arrived.

“It’s as Saiga has shown us. We must fulfill our duty in the face of danger, even if we’re not as strong as Master Sansui. Not just one or two of us, but all of us, together.”

The kingdom would definitely suffer if they fled here. Many of the kingdom’s people would lose their livelihoods to natural disasters, and no doubt death would come in the form of disease and starvation. It was the duty of those assembled here to prevent that from happening.

“I was a peerless swordsman in Magyan, but my worth was merely as a curiosity. In this kingdom, I’m a swordsman who’s far from the strongest, but that I can be of use to someone… I’m blessed to have found this land.”

“Oh? And am I just part of the window dressing?”

“Of course not. It’s because you are here that I can endure. It’s because I don’t want to disappoint you that I can put my life on the line and fight.”

The carriages charged into the land enveloped by the spreading black clouds. The image of the cloud cover turning day into night was one that could only be described as terrifying. It was the same inside the carriage, as the clouds plunged the interior into pitch-black darkness. But in that darkness, hope shone from the young man and young woman as they held hands.

Part 18 — Anxiety

Vajra, the Divine Spear of Rebellion, one of the Eight Sacred Treasures. A famous mythical item known by practically everyone on the continent, the legendary weapon was capable of controlling the weather.

The Arcana Kingdom's skies were being carpeted by a dark layer of storm clouds that made it clear to everyone that the legendary weapon had been stolen by someone who had hostile intentions toward the kingdom and was making use of its powers. The people cowered in fear of the threat and began shouting that the end of the world had arrived. There was no one who could reassure them.

It wasn't just the common people. Soldiers and bureaucrats, nobles and commoners alike could do little but barricade themselves at home and hope they could weather the coming storm. The Arcana Kingdom's functions had entirely seized up before a drop of rain had fallen from the enormous clouds hovering above it.

Even then, those in the Royal Palace had not abandoned hope. The fact that the king and the Four Great Houses had already taken steps was enough to give people hope.

"Seems the dream was right. I had hoped it was just a nightmare," Lord Batterabbe, who had heard about the prophetic dream first, remarked in the conference room with the king and the lords of the other Great Houses.

"We've already taken our steps. All that remains is to wait for news. If we show any uncertainty, it will simply sow fear among those below us."

Lord Sepaeda had his arms crossed and his eyes closed, intentionally making a point to appear unconcerned. He was taking great pains to appear calm.

"My sister and your daughter are on their way to the location in question, with their forces in tow. Surely you don't mean to suggest that your heir or my sister's fiancé aren't to be depended upon?"

He was well aware that his most beloved sister, Douve, was headed toward the Caputo Territories. With that knowledge in hand, Lord Sepaeda had squelched his personal concerns and focused upon his role as a public figure in remaining calm.

"...You're correct. My apologies."

Lord Sepaeda, the youngest of the lords of the Great Houses, was acting in a manner befitting his role. Lord Batterabbe, seeing Lord Sepaeda's attitude, felt a momentary pang of shame.

"...I know Ran and Saiga's abilities; with the two of them together, I have little doubt they'll prevail. Further, Prince Tahlan and...the Royal Guardsmen...are with them. There's little reason to expect an undesirable outcome."

The king, with a solemn expression on his face, swallowed the words that had come close to escaping his mouth. He wanted to order Sepaeda to recall the vacationing Sansui, and quickly. But Lord Sepaeda himself, who

wanted to do that more than anyone in the room, was keeping a tight rein on that impulse. As such, the King was hesitant to force the issue.

“But...there’s always the worst case scenario. Disaea, there’s no reason to hold your ace in reserve, is there?”

If there were no other means to guarantee the outcome, the king might very well have ordered Sepaeda to recall Sansui. In that case, the other three Houses would have likely agreed with him.

“Certainly. I do hope you would trust me to do the right thing here. This is hardly a situation for political games.”

Every one of the figures present trusted Saiga and his companions to succeed. Saiga alone might not inspire that full confidence, but the group he had with him, while small, was made up entirely of people whose skill could be relied upon. However, this was a matter of the kingdom’s survival. They needed to plan for the possibility of failure and take every step necessary.

“I’m certain my ace would be able to defeat the one who stole Vajra.”

“I see.”

Disaea’s ace, Shun Ukiyo, Pandora’s ideal wielder. In his own way, he was as certain to kill his target as Sansui. Even if the one who stole Vajra was powerful enough to kill Saiga and all of his companions, Shun would be able to kill the offender with no risk of failure. It was because the kingdom had already issued instructions to Shun that Sansui hadn’t been recalled.

“Your Majesty... What do you think has happened in Domino?” Lord Disaea asked the King, clearly concerned.

The king’s daughter, Setenve, was in the Domino Republic, the place most likely to have taken the brunt of the initial attack. Given that Setenve was assigned there to keep an eye on Ukyou, she was almost certain to have encountered the one who took Vajra. It was impossible to say with any certainty that she would have survived the encounter.

“Ultimately, the Domino Republic is our vassal state. Losing it is of no consequence to us. To concern yourself with such things when your kingdom’s survival is at stake... You’ve aged, Disaea.”

“Beg pardon, Your Majesty.”

The king returned Disaea’s inquiry with a rather harsher, more impersonal remark than might otherwise be expected. It was his way of showing that there was no need for Disaea’s concern. The sovereign ruler of a kingdom wasn’t allowed the luxury of worrying about his daughter in a situation like this. The king, like his vassal Lord Sepaeda, needed to behave with a cold, professional stoicism.

“Besides, I doubt Ukyou would be taken down so easily. I suspect he’s already taking his own steps to reclaim his Sacred Treasure.”

The king’s stoic demeanor wasn’t just for show; he also trusted Ukyou Fuushi implicitly. While Ukyou himself had almost no combat ability, the king didn’t think he would simply stand idly by after Vajra was taken from him. The most likely scenario was that Ukyou had been taken by surprise,

but was even now already moving to resolve the situation on his own. It was simply not possible that Ukyou would wait for the Arcana Kingdom to come save him.

"...Regarding that matter," Lord Caputo said solemnly. "Just who is this man, the man who took Vajra from Ukyou? Lord Batterabbe, you said you suspected it was a member of Domino's old regime, but I find that hypothesis difficult to believe."

It was pointless for those gathered to engage in speculation at this juncture, but Lord Caputo couldn't help but consider the possibilities.

"Currently, Ukyou is being protected by the Royal Guards assigned to Her Highness. I cannot think that there was anyone among the old regime with the ability to simply take Vajra from him. If that individual had been part of the imperial government, surely they would have moved earlier."

It was the same question that had nagged at Saiga, and entirely natural to ponder for anyone who knew the state of Domino's old regime. It was hard to believe that the Domino Empire, rotten as it was, had anyone of that ability; if such an individual had existed, the revolution would have likely failed.

"I know it's a meaningless question to worry about. Given that whoever this is has taken a Sacred Treasure from Domino and threatens our kingdom, they need to be defeated. But...I can't help but feel that we're missing something. Something very important. Something outright terrifying."

Could it be that they had fundamentally misread the situation? Lord Caputo, in a manner unbecoming of a Great Lord, couldn't help but voice his concern in that regard. No matter how much he knew that it was a pointless exercise, the weight of that uncertainty kept him from doing anything else.

Part 19 — Understanding

The Caputo Territories, at the eastern edge of the Arcana Kingdom.

Paulette Caputo, daughter of Lord Caputo, quietly waited within the walled city located in the territory's eastern extreme. Governing the Caputo Territories in her father's stead, the moment her lands had been enveloped in the dark storm clouds, Paulette had sent a swift messenger by horse toward Domino. Further, in order to receive the reply from Domino as quickly as possible, Paulette had traveled to this city, the location closest to the border with the Domino Republic.

She didn't know whether her actions had much of a point. For a rider to arrive at Domino's capital and deliver a message to Ukyou, return to her, and then to relay that message to the rest of the Arcana Kingdom, would all take the better part of a month even if everything moved as quickly as possible.

Then there were the rain clouds overhead. The moment the rain came down, it would spell the end of the Arcana Kingdom. It looked like that could happen at any moment. In that sense, the Arcana Kingdom was already doomed.

"…Um, hey, Lady Paulette. They made us some tea. Do you want any?"

Paulette was struggling to cope with that pressure. Despite all her rank and privilege, what she could do was the same as any other person in the kingdom — pray to the heavens and wait. And the only thing Shouzo, who accompanied her, could do…was offer her a cup of tea. He even had to get Paulette's lady-in-waiting to make the tea, so the truth was that there was literally nothing he could do.

"Thank you."

But even then, it was a balm for Paulette's worn spirit. Despite the fact that she was the heir-apparent to House Caputo, Great House of Healers, she hadn't realized that her throat was dry.

"Shouzo…"

But once she took the cup from him, she couldn't bring herself to take a sip. Instead, she stared at the ripples spreading along the surface of the tea from the trembling of her hands.

"I did everything that I could do. However…it was all rather unexceptional. If I was blessed with some great talent, perhaps there was more I could have done."

She then turned to ask a question of the mage next to her, a mage who was gifted with far from ordinary talent. He was the most powerful mage on the planet; someone, she felt, could perhaps even do something about the current situation.

"Were it someone other than I, could they have done more? Perhaps they could have made better use of Noah, who is still in my possession."

The Sacred Treasure, Noah the Ark. It was a legendary item that the Arcana Kingdom had acquired purely by accident and entrusted into House

Caputo's hands. Using it under the circumstances could very well start a riot, as masses of people jockeyed to get aboard. If she tried to use the ship of refuge for its intended purpose, evacuating people to safety, it would only serve to fan the flames of conflict.

"If only I had more strength…"

Her decision could cause her people to begin killing one another, people whose only crime was that they didn't want to die. Because of that fear, Paulette had been unable to make effective use of the Sacred Treasure.

"I dunno, really." His reply was an extraordinary simple one. Given that Shouzo really didn't know the answer, he had no choice but to just honestly admit to his ignorance. "But I'm sure everyone feels that way."

"…I guess."

Given that the situation was enough to make most people fall into despair and worry that the world itself was ending, there were surely plenty of average folks who had abandoned their duties and holed up in their houses. As for the common people as a whole? It was doubtful any of them would follow any instructions she issued. Even if she had come up with some sort of miraculous solution, it would have been impossible to actually implement it.

"But it'll be okay! I'm sure Lord Caputo and His Majesty will figure out! I'm sure Ukyou, Sansui, and even Saiga are all doing their best!"

"…Yes, the best we can do is trust in them."

In the end, Shouzo was right. There simply wasn't much they could do to resolve the events that had already occurred. She had done all she could do, so all that she could do now was to pray that others were also doing their best.

"Those who stand atop the Arcana Kingdom will never give in to despair."

Just as she had done everything in her power, surely the king and the other Great Houses were doing what they could do. Which is why Paulette clasped her hands together in prayer.

"B-Beg your pardon, My Lady, but I bring news! President Ukyou of the Domino Republic has arrived in the city!"

The paladin who hurriedly burst into Paulette's room brought good news.

"T-Truly? Show him in at once!"

She thanked the heavens for answering her prayers.

"I-In addition, Lady Happine Batterabbe and Lady Douve Sepaeda have also arrived!"

"Ohh?!"

"Lord Mizu Saiga, Prince Magyan Tahlan, and the Royal Guardsmen have arrived with them!"

"W-What's going on?! Surely their arrival is much too early!"

The people who could solve the questions that had plagued her, who had stolen Vajra from Ukyou, how to stop the man who stole Vajra, had all arrived at once.

"A-All I was doing was praying..."

"Wow, Lady Paulette, I didn't know you could do that with mysticism~."

"I-I can't do anything like that. If I could, I would have been praying much more fervently."

Mysticism was only useful for defense and healing. It didn't have the power to improve the situation simply through prayer, which was why Paulette was struggling to deal with the sudden good turn in her fortune.

"A-At any rate, show them all into the same meeting room! Bring the largest map we have in the manor!"

"So, really sorry about that. He took Vajra from me," Ukyou, who had been Vajra's owner, appeared with Elixir and Dainsleif in tow and said with a tired sigh.

The new arrivals had been shown to the conference room within the city's palace. Despite the fact that he had caused a situation that could very well spell the end of an entire kingdom, Ukyou's attitude was far from one to be expected of a public figure. It probably meant that he simply had no emotional breathing room to put on appearances and was too tired to even try.

"It's only been about two weeks since he took her. That said, I haven't been able to get a good sense of night or day thanks to all this darkness, so I don't have a precise number. This has just happened way too quickly...I figured we would've had a bit more time."

"On that front, we're in agreement. Vajra shouldn't have the ability to manipulate the weather with this much speed in her current form..."

"Hahaha! Well, no use crying over it, since it's already happened! We need to hurry up and go rescue Vajra!"

Like Eckesachs, Dainsleif, Elixir and Ukyou agreed that the clouds were spreading far faster than they should be. It seemed that the answer had in fact been that the weather was changing at an impossibly fast rate, rather than the possibility that Vajra had been stolen much earlier than they thought.

"We're glad to see that you're safe, Master Ukyou. We would appreciate it if you could give us a succinct summary of the situation," Paulette asked Ukyou, as the Arcanian representative in the room. In the conference were the ladies of the Great Houses, the aces, Ran, Tahlan, and the Sacred Treasures.

"Well... Basically, a giant dude who wouldn't even tell us his name came into my palace and took Vajra from me," Ukyou briefly summarized with a tone of intense irritation. Just as in Saiga's prophetic dream, someone had stolen Vajra from him. "There wasn't any other real damage. Setenve, Danua, and Ungaikyo are all safe. Thing is, if we all came at once, no one

would get any work done in the capital, so it's just me, Dainsleif and Elixir this time."

"Were you able to find out anything about who he's associated with or what his objectives were?"

"Not a clue."

Even Tahlan was a bit taken aback at Ukyou's absurd boldness. There wasn't a hint of the meekness even the greatest of heroes would feel if they'd lost a Sacred Treasure, then exposed their liege state to this level of danger. Ukyou could probably have stood to sound a tad more apologetic.

"And so what did you come all this way for, exactly, Mr. President?"

Although Douve's barb was extraordinarily rude, no one present could really fault her tone.

"Oh, don't be like that. We do have a few things we do know. Dainsleif?"

"Mm. I've kept the blood from when he fought the Royal Guardsmen. While I can't absorb it, I know his rough direction and distance." Dainsleif, who had accompanied Ukyou, thus had a complete grasp of where the stolen item had been taken.

"Really?!"

The man who stole Vajra was impossible to track through normal means, given the sheer scale of the cloud cover. But if they knew where he was, the problem was already halfway to its resolution. There were three aces present, along with the berserker Ran. In addition, they had Tahlan, the Royal Guardsmen, and the paladins. It seemed like they had more than enough forces at their disposal to deal with him.

"So, where is he now?"

"He's...heading directly this way." Dainsleif pointed at the exact center of the map laid out in the middle of the conference room's large table. The map was centered on the Caputo territories, and so the fortified city where they all sat was right in the middle.

"...He's coming here?" Paulette was shocked, but the group from the royal capital appeared unfazed. Instead they seemed a bit disappointed that Saiga's prophetic dream turned out to be correct yet again.

"Hahaha! Just so that you all understand! These clouds that are covering the sky, they're only being held together by magic! If you destroy Vajra, it'll come down as rain and wash everything away!" Elixir, who, for some reason was in a good mood, added further details to the already grim outlook. "Therefore, we must retake Vajra and move these clouds over to the ocean!"

"Thank you... For your explanation..." Paulette said with a faintly troubled expression, then looked to her own ace. In the worst case, she had planned to unleash Shouzo's magic at the enemy's location. Unfortunately, Shouzo's magic could very well destroy even a Sacred Treasure. Since Vajra needed to be recovered intact, that option was now off the table.

"...Given the darkness, getting too far away from the city would be dangerous. I think it's best to intercept him at Shouzo's bombing site." Happine confirmed to those present. They had no choice but to bring about

the circumstances just as they had occurred in the prophetic dream. Trying to go against that outcome was just likely to bring unnecessary complications. “We traveled all this way by carriage in this darkness. I’m sure we’re all tired. We should all get rest and get ready for him to appear.”

Happine’s proposal was quite appropriate. Given that it had been essentially a forced march to get here, the Batterabbe party was already exhausted from their journey. If they didn’t rest, so as to face their enemy fresh, they could very well lose a battle they’d otherwise have won.

“You seem to be taking your sweet time, Happine. This rain could come down at any moment, you know.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Douve. If they wanted it to rain, they would have done it already.”

Happine was, again, correct. It hadn’t rained in Saiga’s prophetic dream, but even putting that aside, it was hard to believe that it would suddenly start raining now.

“There are more than enough storm clouds to destroy this kingdom. Given that it’s not raining, it probably means he has no intention of actually doing it.”

During the journey here, the members of the two parties had all been frightened that it could begin raining at any moment. But after several days of that fear, they had grown tired of being afraid. And Happine’s point was perfectly valid: it wasn’t even clear if this was an actual danger to the Arcana Kingdom itself. Of course, they needed to retake Vajra, but given that they knew the enemy’s location, it would be ridiculous to go in unprepared.

“...Then why did he take Vajra?”

No one could answer Paulette’s question. In fact, all of the people present were stuck on the same question.

“Ahm, maybe he’s a remnant of Domino’s old regime?” Saiga offered the name of the most likely culprit, even as he was certain that he was wrong. He did so because no one else came to mind.

“It can’t be. He didn’t make a single drop of rain fall on Domino. Besides, he showed no real hatred toward me.”

For members of Domino’s old regime, the Arcana Kingdom was their enemy because it had established diplomatic relations with the Domino Republic. But their most hated enemy was the new regime; among that new regime, Ukyou, the revolutionary leader, had to be the one they wanted to kill more than anyone else. The one who stole Vajra ignored both the new Domino government and Ukyou himself to make his way toward the Arcana Kingdom. The likelihood that he was related to the old regime was close to zero.

“Then why did he take Vajra?”

“You’re asking me? Hell, I want to know,” Ukyou answered with annoyance at Shouzo’s question.

“Pardon me, but Master Ukyou, would you mind giving us a more detailed account of what transpired?” Tahlan asked with a tense expression.

“If possible, we would like to know what sort of Arts the attacker wielded.”

“…Let me start with this: the attacker didn’t use anything flashy. All he was doing was fighting with a spear. But…it looked like his wounds healed as quickly as they were inflicted.”

Those who had come from the royal capital glanced over at Ran. Being able to heal one’s wounds while fighting was an extraordinary advantage. Ran had been born with the ability to do so.

“Well… Still not sure about anything, really, but I can at least tell you what happened.”

Ukyou began to describe how it came to be that he lost Vajra.

You wanted to be important. You wanted to be in charge of governing the country. You wanted jobs that were suited for your talents. Right? Then let’s get to work.

The members of the Domino Republic’s new government were in Hell. While none of them had ever been to a place literally called Hell, the work the President demanded of them forced them to endure a distinctly hellish kind of suffering.

We killed all the people who used to do all this work, so we’ve gotta fill the gap. That goes without saying, right? Surely you lot aren’t going to suddenly say that you didn’t actually want the job, right? Just that you wanted people to lavish praise upon you and let you reap all the rewards, without doing any of the work?

There was no way that their predecessors were nearly as busy as they were. But of course, if there were, say, one hundred government bureaucrats that had been killed in the revolution and you were to replace them with just twenty revolutionaries, those twenty revolutionaries would naturally have to do five times the work per person.

With only twenty-four hours in a day, there was only so much they could cover by working longer. They also had to work much, much harder. The working conditions were abysmal. They weren’t allowed to sleep, even as they worked deep into the night.

“Urk… Ugh…”

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Those who worked under the President wept as they toiled away. There were piles of paperwork stacked up in the large conference room, and despite the fact that they had been processing those forms for what felt like ages, the end seemed nowhere in sight.

It’s not that they were being forced to do endlessly increasing amounts of busywork. No, the piles of paperwork were just the things that they had determined were necessary for running the country. They were simply far too short on manpower, but they also weren’t in any position to complain.

Everyone present had pitched themselves as highly capable administrators and had been given an appropriate amount of power and pay by the revolutionary government.

All of them had believed that they were destined for great things or that they genuinely wanted to work at the highest levels of government. All of them had wanted prestige and money. All of them were now crammed into this room and were working next to Ukyou. Given that Ukyou would summarily execute anyone who purposely sabotaged the workings of the government, none of them dared to shirk their duties, and few took any rest without some serious justification.

They might have prestige, but so did everyone around them. They had rank, but they had no time to flaunt it. They were paid well, but they had no time to spend the money. As such, they were stuck in a working Hell.

Ukyou himself led by example, going out of his way to work harder than anyone. With the President himself working until his eyes were red from exhaustion, there was no way his subordinates could do any less.

You know what'll happen if you disappoint me, right?

Ukyou was a man who held a grudge. In fact, he was so capable of holding a grudge that he had brought down the Empire, captured the entire Imperial House, and executed every last one of them. No one had any desire to betray a man like that. All of the individuals in the conference room had simply hoped to reap the rewards of being among the new emperor's retinue and instead found themselves shackled to him as his virtual slaves.

"...It's getting late. You need to get some rest."

However, things had improved of late. The worn-out members of Ukyou's inner circle looked up as the supposedly austere Setenve spoke up in favor of rest.

"But we're not finished yet..."

"I'm saying that working any longer will just destroy your productivity. Even once you're done today, you'll have more work to do tomorrow. You have a long life of work ahead of you, and we can't have you burning out too quickly."

Given that Ukyou was a man who had brought down an entire government through sheer force of will, he had a tendency to power his way through fatigue with sheer willpower. As such, he was a man who was willing to work all through the night without rest. But now, he finally had someone who could put a stop to his all-nighters.

"...Sigh, such are the travails of a vassal state. Okay, fine... You lot, stop working for now. We're going to the cafeteria."

Further, everyone who was working there now had something to look forward to. It was now possible to eat food from Ukyou's homeland.

As they moved to the cafeteria, the assembled aides and staffers were so excited that they forgot their fatigue. They were all of a certain age, but they were practically skipping through the halls as though they were children getting their dessert. They had something they'd truly desired.

They had somehow maintained a monopoly on the delicacies that were out of the reach of the common people.

“Oh my lawwwd!”

Danua, the Silo of Plenty. She was the fifth of the President’s Sacred Treasures, an unexpected bonus that he had acquired on his diplomatic mission to the Arcana Kingdom. Her function was extraordinarily simple. When used by a compassionate individual, she created unlimited amounts of food. While there was the limitation that the food would disappear in a day’s time, the effect was dramatic.

In the Republic’s capital, the delicious bread, soup, salad, fish, and fried meats that she created were widely distributed to rich and poor alike. The price the capital’s residents paid was that their stockpiled food supplies were then sent to Domino’s outlying territories, but there was no one who objected to exchanging their old, bland food for new, delicious food.

But Ukyou’s inner circle was permitted to eat even foods that would make the residents of the capital drool with envy.

“Workin’ ’til this late hour! All that paper’s gonna be the death of you! Tuck in to this here food, brush your teeth, take a bath, and head on over to bed!”

While Danua herself did work related to agricultural policy, she was a tool and didn’t suffer from fatigue. She was extremely lively and constantly spoke in a voice just short of a shout. The dishes that she served to Ukyou and his aides were various filling meals such as hamburgers, ramen, and curry. The food issued to the ordinary citizen was generally breads of various sorts, soups, and the like. While those were delicious in their own right, they paled in comparison to the dishes on the table in front of Ukyou.

“Y’all tuck in and eat your fill so you can work hard again tomorrow!”

This was the one time of day that Ukyou himself broke out in a grin. In front of him there was piping hot food from his homeland. That fact was enough to make even him smile. Yes, even Ukyou, the man who would vow revenge not only on the man who wronged him, but on his entire family, and hunt all of them down to the last man, woman, and child, could do nothing but smile when presented with the meal in front of him.

“Well, then… I’ll dig in.”

This was the one time of day where everyone was fully absorbed in their food. They forgot about who it was who sat next to them and instead focused their attention entirely on their dinner. In this space, which mixed the passionate enthusiasm for food with the silence brought about from eating it, everyone was busy moving their spoons or forks.

Everyone present found such fulfillment in their meals that they felt every sip, every bite, was bringing life back into their exhausted bodies. The delicious food that they had all dreamed of had been made a reality by their fearsome dictator.

“Ahh… Delicious.”

The word that escaped the President's lips reflected the sentiments of everyone in the room. None of them were motivated to work hard tomorrow. They had all forgotten all about tomorrow, and they were just focused on the moment that they could sate their hunger with delicious food. They were all alive just for this moment. Everyone in the room felt the same way.

"...I wonder about this at every meal, but were you really a commoner in your homeland?"

"And like I tell you every meal, yes. Saiga, Shouzo, and Sansui were the same way, it seems like."

Setenve struggled to understand what the homeland of the aces was like. Of course, she knew that a wealthy country meant that its people ate well. But the foods Ukyou brought out went far beyond that. Even Setenve Arcana, the eldest daughter of the Arcana Royal Family and no stranger to luxury foods herself, found the raw, uncooked foods that Ukyou had eaten in his homeland to be quite delicious. She'd heard that both commoner and noble alike were in ecstasy at the jams made with those foreign fruits, and she could understand why.

"...Compared to your country, no doubt our countries seem poor, backward, and primitive."

"Hahaha! No need to get so sulky, Setenve! It's not like we were the ones who started that country!"

It seems that their homeland was rich even when Sansui was still a normal human, over five hundred years ago. But she had never heard of a country of that sort nearby. How did they even get to this region in the first place?

"Hamburger, fries, and soda... Ah, the holy trifecta of junk food."

Ukyou was currently eating a patty of meat with vegetables sandwiched between two slices of bread, potatoes that had been mashed and then made into shapes and fried, and a drink that was made by flavoring sparkling water. It tasted good, but it also had a rough, unrefined quality about it.

But, to call these dishes "junk" — presumably something little better than trash. Just how abundant was the food in their homeland? Given that, judging by what Ukyou had said, his homeland even had policies aimed at reducing the amount of land under cultivation and implementing wide-scale destruction of foodstuffs, they must have been wealthy beyond measure.

"I couldn't help but crave it when I thought I'd never eat it again... But when I eat it like this, it really hits the spot! It's most certainly a meal that makes me happy!"

"Oh my lawd! Eatin' greasy stuff like that this late will make you fat! I made sure to cook up some vegetables for your health, so make sure you eat them, too!"

They still couldn't figure out what dialect Danua was speaking, but she began to pass out platters of leaf and root vegetables to everyone present.

Ordinarily, they were things to avoid, but they were a perfect palate cleanser from all the grease that they'd just consumed.

Everyone took forkfuls of the vegetables. Given that they were fresh, there was something oddly fulfilling about them, as well.

"Bless your heart, Master, but your table manners need work! You're setting a bad example, given you're the highest ranking fellow here! Sit up straight!"

"I'm really happy you're here, Danua."

Danua could produce anything that her wielder had eaten before, which had an unfortunate downside: Ukyou hadn't consumed alcohol when he was back home. Considering how delicious the food was, surely his homeland had its share of delicious alcoholic drinks, as well. It was something that everyone there thought was a bit of a pity. Still, if it was that delicious, they could very well have drunk themselves to death. Thinking about it that way, it was probably for the best that she couldn't produce any alcohol from his memories.

"I wish I could let the city's folk have some of these here eats, too."

"I get what you're saying, but given how we distribute it, we can't give folks things that won't be any good when they're cold."

"True…"

If they passed out something like ramen in a prepared state, it would probably taste quite terrible by the time the people got their hands on it. They could still probably figure out a way to do it, but Ukyou didn't think it was a good idea to distribute dishes that they knew wouldn't be any good when it reached the eaters.

"It's thanks to you, Danua, that we've got enough food for the countryside, people in the capital can eat delicious food, and I can eat dishes from home. You've done nothing but good for us."

"Bless your heart, Master, but you're the most demanding master I've ever had. Would have never expected a man like you to be compassionate on a country-wide level."

"Just like you, I've seen a lot of poverty. I'm glad it wasn't all for nothing."

"Mm, darned right…"

Given the depleted state of the Domino Republic, just how many of its households were actually able to enjoy this level of comfort? When he thought about it that way, Ukyou had no qualms about working his subordinates to death, but he had to hesitate when told it was bad for productivity.

"Danua… Make me some tamago kake gohan and soy sauce as well as…"

"Miso soup, right? Well, fine… But that's it for tonight."

"Right, I hear ya!"

"I'm making all of y'all get some exercise tomorrow morning. Running and stretches will get you all healthy!"

"No one here's gonna complain about that."

Danua reached into her fob and produced a tray with miso soup and tamago kake gohan. The tray also had a cup of hot green tea, as well. Danua was a silo that went the extra mile-o.

“Alright… Once we’re done eating, it’s time to brush our teeth and sleep. Remember, you lot, we’ve got more work to do tomorrow!”

It was a reality that they didn’t want to face, but given that it was the founder of the republic himself saying those words, no one could argue with him. Ukyou himself looked quite content as he said this. There was just something about drizzling soy sauce onto the raw egg and pouring it onto the steaming dish of white rice. He ate his tamago kake gohan, drank his miso soup, and had a cup of tea to close out his meal.

“Man, I’m so afraid of this tea!”

“What’s scary about tea?”

“Oh, uh, it’s from a rakugo joke… Mm, what’s going on?”

Just as the day seemed to be coming to an end, the palace was suddenly abuzz with activity. The clamor outside was so loud that they could hear it in the cafeteria.

“…Finish up your meals. Setenve and Danua, come with me. We’re going to gather the other Treasures from their jobs and figure out what’s going on.”

Ukyou had a knack for bringing down castles, and so he had a sense for when a castle or palace was about to fall. Ukyou couldn’t shake the bad feeling in his gut as he smiled a predatory smile.

“An intruder, perhaps… But do you think it’s so important that you, the sovereign, need to deal with it yourself?”

“Yeah, I do. I just have a hunch that this guy’s my enemy.”

Ukyou engaged in a brief conversation with Setenve as he collected the Treasures from around the palace and equipped them. Even as he gathered his tools, the sounds of battle continued within the palace. Further, the sounds seemed to be coming from just a single direction. The intruder or intruders were trying to force their way through from a single direction.

“Your Excellency, I bring news. There’s currently a single intruder within the palace!”

One of the Royal Guardsmen on loan from the Arcana Kingdom appeared in front of the pair to report on the situation. His expression was extremely tense. It was hard to believe that this seasoned warrior and his colleagues were simply dealing with a single intruder.

“Currently, the elite Arcanian troops are attempting to remove the intruder, but we haven’t been able to capture him yet. To avoid the worst case scenario, we would like you two to take shelter…”

Unlike the Domino Republic’s soldiers, who were all pretty much amateur conscripts, the Royal Guardsmen who had accompanied Setenve as her bodyguard were elite professionals. If they couldn’t restrain the intruder, it meant that the intruder was an extraordinarily powerful opponent.

Setenve’s mind immediately brought up the image of Sansui single-handedly demolishing the Royal Guard. It seemed this was the case with the

Royal Guardsman who had come to them as a messenger and the Guardsman declared confidently, “The intruder isn’t as powerful as the Lightning Slasher. We’re more than capable of defeating him!” in an effort to offer some reassurance.

Ukyou simply pushed him aside.

“This is my castle. I’ll go see what’s happening with my own eyes.”

Setenve followed behind him. She wanted to witness what it was that Ukyou intended to do and who it was who had broken into the castle. The Guardsman who had tried to stop them sighed and followed in their wake. As they proceeded through the palace, they came upon fighting in the courtyard.

“Stop him! Don’t let him get any further into the palace!”

“Work together! He’s not an unbeatable opponent!”

“Don’t let him rest!”

Five Royal Guardsmen had surrounded a large man armed with a short spear and were fighting him. Swords wreathed in flame lit the dark courtyard and the intruder.

“A collection of skilled opponents… To be able to fight me…”

It didn’t appear to be an assassin from another country, nor did it seem a soldier from the Domino Empire. If anything, he was dressed in ragged clothes, almost like a vagrant. The intruder had no armor or protective equipment on, and the only weapon he had was the short spear in his hand. Despite this lack of equipment, he was able to face off with Arcana’s elite and maintain a clear advantage over them.

The contrast was a clear display of the intruder’s strength, but the Royal Guardsman didn’t seem to doubt for a moment that they would win. They could win, and so they must win. With that thought in their minds, they attacked…

“That’s enough! All of you, stand down!”

A shout from a man with the unmistakable authority of a king forced everyone to stop in their tracks. Although he had basically zero no combat ability, the country’s sovereign nevertheless unleashed an intimidating aura as he approached the group in the courtyard. Everyone present, whether Domino soldiers, Arcanian soldiers, or the Guardsmen surrounding the intruder, were forced to stop in place at the sheer authority emanating from Ukyou.

“You are this castle’s master?”

“Yes. This is my country, and this is my castle.”

The Guardsmen surrounding the intruder cautiously maintained their guard through their labored breathing, slightly loosening the cordon as Ukyou approached. They were hesitant to let a dangerous intruder near their master, even if their master was the wielder of Elixir, but they could do nothing but trust in his judgment.

“Barging in unannounced at this late hour… You’re not going to claim you were just here to say hi, are ya?”

Ukyou was obviously angry and noticeably irate. His glare carried so much anger that had it been a subordinate on the other end, the poor target would have fallen dead of a heart attack. But, the opponent was no ordinary man, either. He showed no sign of cowering before Ukyou's gaze.

"…Why the hell are you here?"

"Hand over your sacred treasure. Hand over the Divine Spear."

The Divine Spear, Vajra, gave the power to control the weather to those that sought to challenge powerful authorities or entire kingdoms. Because everyone present knew just how powerful the spear was, the demand made everyone all the more tense.

"That's all I demand. If you won't hand it over, I'll take your castle apart piece by piece until you do."

It was true that, outside of Ukyou and Setenve's lives, the only things worth assaulting the palace to obtain were the five Sacred Treasures. Of them, Vajra was the one that was most important to keep out of the hands of an intruder.

"Fine. That's all you want?"

"W-Wait, M-Master?!"

Ukyou offered up Vajra's haft without a moment's hesitation. Vajra was in a panic at Ukyou's complete lack of hesitation, but there was no way for her to go against his intentions.

"Wise."

"As opposed to an idiot like you, yeah."

The handover happened so smoothly that those watching were caught completely off-guard. Though they probably should have tried to stop it, all anyone there could do was watch in silence.

"W-Wait, Master! My Master! Wait, wait, wait wait wait!"

The lone exception was Vajra, who was kicking up quite a fuss.

"Good luck, Vajra. I'm sure our Master will retake you soon."

"Have fun, Vajra. I'm sure you can bear a short separation."

"Yes, it's only a short separation, Vajra!"

"Come home soon, Vajra!"

All of the other Sacred Treasures saw her off with their best wishes. Given that the owner was handing over ownership, the tools could do nothing but obey his wishes.

"D-Damn you! I'll remember this!"

"So, that's what happened."

All of those listening to the story all felt a certain amount of pity for Vajra. Just why was this man able to hand over a being that spoke like a person and could turn into a person so easily, to some random stranger?

"The Royal Guardsmen seemed to think they could win… But from what I saw, they had no chance. If I let Arcana's elite soldiers die in a fight they couldn't win, I'd have nothing to offer in apology to Setenve or His Majesty."

Even if Ukyou had no combat skills of his own, he was an expert tactician who had brought down an entire country. Evidently he had felt with just a glance that there was something that the Guardsmen couldn't overcome. It was just a hunch on his part, but he trusted his instincts and acted entirely around them. He had determined that the man who took Vajra could only be defeated by an ace.

"Even if I had run, he would have caught up to me. Under those circumstances, that was the best option I had."

It would have been pointless to run, and even if he had bought time, there were no reinforcements coming. That was why Ukyou had decided to simply let the intruder have what he wanted and see what he was going to do. The intruder himself had set out for the kingdom where those aces lived. While it was very convenient, there was something eerie about that behavior.

"Frankly, I was willing to hand over anything but Danua, but he was only interested in Vajra. I didn't understand that, either. There was no way that he belonged to any kind of organization."

"He's not a member of an organization… So he's moving toward his own individual ends?"

"Based on his expression and his actions, he looked like someone who didn't trust anyone but himself. Besides, look at how slowly he's moving. It doesn't seem like he's got anyone waiting for him or anything of the sort."

Ukyou was able to articulate what he felt instinctively in response to Saiga's questions. His observational skills and ability to judge people had been acquired through the harsh experience of directing a revolution.

"I had thought he was there for me. His eyes were that of one seeking vengeance, of one who was driven by a personal vendetta."

"Yes, indeed. From my perspective it seemed he had given up on everything but his vendetta. He had the eyes of a man who was willing to die."

Dainsleif and Elixir gave their observations, based on their centuries of experience and comparisons to their own masters.

"Well, as you might guess from all of this, he's a dangerous bastard. I would have liked to have Sansui here, too, but… Saiga, can I leave him to you?"

If the intruder had belonged to some organization, or even a country, they might have had a chance at negotiating with him. But if he was motivated solely by a personal vendetta, there was nothing to do but defeat him in combat. They had to defeat a dangerous opponent, one whose Rare Art was a complete mystery.

"Yes, leave it to me," Saiga shook off his anxiety and announced. "I might not be able to beat him or protect everyone by myself. That said, I've brought companions who're committed to fighting and who won't back down, whatever the challenge."

That Saiga would fight went without saying, but he wasn't alone. He had accepted his own immaturity, his own failings, and had come here to fight in spite of all that. He had committed himself to not relying on Sansui, the man who everyone wanted to rely upon. That was true not just of Saiga, but of Tahlan, Ran, and the others present.

"Alright, we're counting on you. So, Eckesachs, what do you think?"

Ukyou, while noting his confidence in Saiga, still wanted to make sure they had enough forces at their disposal. While that was likely to put a dent in morale, it was unavoidable given that the survival of entire countries was at stake.

"Rest easy. My Master has grown much stronger, stronger even than when you last saw him fight here in Caputo." However, Eckesachs quickly restored that morale. "He has worked diligently, endured humiliation, and steadily grown in strength. While he still has his weaknesses, Tahlan and Ran are more than enough to make up for them!"

The Ultimate Legendary Sword, which had seen countless battles, gave her seal of approval.

"So long as it's not Suiboku or Sansui, we won't lose to anyone, no matter how many there are of them!"

The man walked steadily in the direction from which he felt a clear presence. He walked and he walked and he walked. At times, he stopped to sit and meditate, but eventually he always got up and continued to walk in that one direction.

Using the power of the Divine Spear, he manipulated the weather around him and gathered the clouds, without letting them rain down a single drop of rain. The clouds were so thick that, if unleashed, the rains would wash away everything beneath them. But even then, the man continued to gather them up.

"...Hey, you."

The Divine Spear Vajra, for the first time in the ten thousand years of her existence, envied Eckesachs. Vajra cursed that she couldn't reject a master she didn't like. She felt nothing but displeasure with the man who continued walking forward without a word, but she had also realized something and that realization had sent a shudder of fear through her.

There was something that simply didn't make sense. Something that was impossible, no matter how she thought about it, but it didn't make sense if the impossible wasn't true.

"Hey, are you listening! I, the Divine Spear, Vajra, am speaking to you!"

He was gathering the storm clouds far too quickly. No matter how she thought about it, the speed at which the clouds were gathering should have been impossible. On a general level, Vajra's functions had to obey the laws of nature. She couldn't create a breeze in a sealed room, and she couldn't make it rain where there was no cloud cover. Without a large lake or ocean, she wasn't able to quickly generate rain clouds.

“I, a great Sacred Treasure, am talking to you, you usurper!”

She had wondered just how great his desire to challenge the heavens was, but even then, there were limits. Given that she was designed to be used against other human beings, there was no way that she could break the laws of nature. There had to be something else.

“Silence.”

The man didn’t appear to care; he only wanted quiet. He was focused. Walking beneath the storm clouds, he remembered his past, dwelled upon it, and used it for motivation. He was walking to throw his accumulated emotions, thoughts, and memories at the objective at the end of his journey.

“No, I won’t be silent! I finally know what you are!”

“I told you to be silent.”

Vajra was angry. She was thoroughly, completely angry. Her master, who had challenged the heavens and defeated an emperor… Now that her master had become the master of the heavens in his own way, he was to wield her in a fashion that was almost divine, in a way that would bring prosperity to his people. But this intruder, this usurper, was putting all of that at risk.

“Just how much trouble does he mean to cause all of us? That bastard!”

She had finally noticed the obvious. That this man, even though it had been several days since he’d taken her from Ukyou, hadn’t had a single drop of water to drink or a bite to eat. While the Eight Sacred Treasures had no need to eat or drink, this man was human — at least, he was supposed to be. There was only one Rare Art in the world that would let him go without food or drink.

“You’re an Immortal, just like Suiboku, aren’t you?!”

She realized that her words were the truth when the man, who had been walking without interruption, stopped when he heard them.

“I thought so! Which means your goal is Suiboku, isn’t it?!”

“...You know of him? You know of Suiboku?”

“How could I not! The man who, despite being a mere human, controlled the weather just like I. Do you know just how much chaos that man has brought to the mortal realm?!”

Immortals don’t wield Vajra. The Immortal Arts were the only Rare Art capable of manipulating the weather, and while far inferior to Vajra, they could do the exact same things she could do. In this case, their inferiority referred not to scale, but to speed. Something that Vajra could accomplish in three days would take an Immortal thirty days.

But given that Immortals had nearly infinite lifespans, that detail was of little concern to them. Further, Immortals that had broken their ties with the mortal world would have no reason to rebel against the nations around them. Even Sansui, a youngster by Immortal standards, was older than the Arcana Kingdom itself. Essentially, to an Immortal, the countries of the mortal world held little meaning or value.

“...So, he did in fact commit a great evil.”

“Yes, indeed he did! Just how many islands do you think he sank under the sea? How many mountains slashed down for sport? How many forests burned down to sate his own ego?!”

But the Sacred Treasures knew that there was an Immortal, who, unlike the rest of his kind, had influenced the mortal world. They knew of the man who, because of his extreme power, had wrought all sorts of havoc and destruction upon the world.

“I am Fukei. Suiboku and I trained under the same master.”

The long flow of time had already hidden his crimes from the world. It had already been over fifteen hundred years since Suiboku last went on a rampage. There were no surviving countries that remembered his atrocities. All that remained were stories passed down as myths in places like Tempera Village.

“I’ve come to kill Suiboku, the man who destroyed our homeland, Karei!”

But this man hadn’t forgotten the crime that Suiboku had committed: the crime of destroying their homeland.

This makes me the greatest! I’m now the greatest!

Suiboku, wait!

That’s right! No one can stop me now!

What?! All that you’ve destroyed, and now you’re going to run?!

Run? What nonsense! I’m simply leaving. I’m leaving for the mortal world, where I’ll show them my skill!

Ordinarily Vajra wouldn’t activate for a personal vendetta, but that changed if the target of that vendetta is one who has the power to destroy entire countries. If that target is regarded as a power far beyond human reach, a natural disaster rather than a mere individual, then everything was different.

“I will kill him. That’s what I’ve spent the last three thousand years preparing to do.”

In the hands of an Immortal, Vajra, who could control the weather, became a tool that allows control of the heavens themselves.

“…You think you can win? Against that monster?!”

“I will. I must! That’s what those three thousand years were for!”

The Immortal who had spent the last three thousand years preparing himself felt the pull. The pull of the monster waiting for him at the end of his walking. The presence of the great criminal, the great destroyer, who still sought even greater power for himself.

“I cannot possibly lose!”

Fukei continued onward, venting his hatred through his aura. His slow, deliberate steps seemed to confirm his utter hatred of Suiboku with each step he took. Fukei, who was certain he had the power to bend the heavens and the earth to his will, walked over a border with no regard for its existence. He walked, certain that the monster that he sought sensed his approach.

Part 20 — Encounter

“Sniff... I really don’t wanna do this...”

Noah was the largest and toughest of the Eight Sacred Treasures. As a ship meant for emergency evacuations, she was designed less for pure speed and more for durability. Having been accidentally shot down over Caputo by Shouzo, she was now in House Caputo’s care.

“Now, now, it’s not like we’re going to make you fight.”

“I don’t wanna be used at all...”

Noah, alone of the Eight Sacred Treasures, considered it best that she never fulfill her purpose. After all, she was created with the explicit purpose of serving as an emergency evacuation vessel. Given that, it was understandable that she wasn’t thrilled with the prospect of being used.

“It’ll be fine, really. We’re not the ones who are gonna fight, anyway.”

“But... It’s dumb to go where it’s dangerous. When there’s danger, what you’re supposed to do is run away or hide.”

“Well, sure, but if everyone did that we’d never solve any problems.”

Still, it was Shouzo’s job to convince her; unusually for him, he was making progress by simply reasoning with Noah logically.

“Lady Paulette. Just to double check, if it’s really dangerous, I’m supposed to freeze the whole area so that we can run away, right?”

“Yes. If the worst comes to pass, we’ll have to ask that of you,” Paulette nodded in acknowledgment at Shouzo’s query. In the worst case scenario, they’d run away and leave it in the hands of House Disaea’s ace. But it was hard to believe that such a contingency would be necessary at all.

Currently there were three warriors of first-class skill lined up outside the ark. Ran the Berserker, Tahlan the Shadow Summoner, and Saiga, House Batterabbe’s heir. Ordinarily this would be an excessive amount of force to direct at a single human target.

With that said, however, Ukyou, the Arcana Royal Family’s ace, wasn’t able to hide his unease.

“Ahm...Lord Ukyou. Do you not believe that we can win?”

“Yep. Don’t think we have a chance in the slightest,” Ukyou answered without hesitation to Happine Batterabbe’s question. There wasn’t any doubt in his reply, either. The sentiment may as well have been written on his face as he glared out across the wastelands. From the Arcana Kingdom’s point of view, House Disaea’s ace was their actual trump card, meaning that losing here wouldn’t be as catastrophic as it might seem.

However, Ukyou had a different reason for his pessimism.

“There was just something about the guy that defied understanding. Not that I was trying all that hard.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’re just too many things in the world that are beyond my personal knowledge. If there’s one thing I can say, it’s that he didn’t seem to lack experience, nor was he unaware of the situation that he was in.”

Ukyou was a hero who had subdued an entire nation, not with his own personal power, but by making use of his tools and through skillful politics. To him, the experience that drove an individual seemed a vital part of the equation.

"The reason you're not too worried about him, the reason you think you can't lose, is because he bled when fighting against five Royal Guardsmen, right?"

"...Yes, that's right. Sansui once defeated the entire Royal Guard without taking any injuries himself. He even managed it without killing any of the guardsmen in the process. Furthermore, Sansui noted that Ran, the berserker down there, could single-handedly defeat the Royal Guard."

"I don't doubt that. He's probably right."

"...Then why are you so certain we can't win?"

Rephrasing it in rather more blunt terms, someone who had sustained injuries fighting five Royal Guardsmen had no chance against Ran or Saiga. Ran and Saiga could easily defeat a handful of Royal Guardsmen.

"Saiga, Shouzo, and I know all sorts of stories and tales. My conclusion, based on all of them, is that there's no contradiction in someone being wounded by Royal Guardsmen and yet also being impossible for the three of them down there to defeat."

In a certain sense, Ukyou, as an outsider to the Arcana Kingdom, was better able to gauge relative strength. Those from the Arcana Kingdom, including Setenve's bodyguards, were far too used to thinking of strength using Sansui as the benchmark. Sansui had been able to demolish the Royal Guard without taking any injuries. Conversely, the Guardsmen had been able to injure the intruder, therefore they believed they could defeat him, unlike Sansui. That was also the reason the others present here thought that they could defeat him.

"It's true that, even if he was holding back, the Guardsmen were able to wound him. He might still have taken damage even when fighting all-out. In that sense, he's probably not nearly as skilled in physical combat as Sansui. But the powerful are still powerful, even if they're not the best at close combat."

The biggest example of which was House Caputo's ace, aboard this very ark. Shouzo's existence was a reminder that optimism about the outcome might not be entirely warranted.

"That's..."

"Don't worry, Happine. That doesn't guarantee your fiancé's going to lose."

While Ukyou has his concerns, he also didn't want to demoralize his allies. It was precisely because that Ukyou had nothing he could do in response to this situation that he had handed over Vajra without a fight and asked for reinforcements from Arcana. Ukyou was well aware that this also meant he had no right to lecture his allies from on high. Further, Arcana

had already taken steps to send Pandora's wielder as additional reinforcements.

"Besides, in the worst case, Pandora and her wielder will be heading over here, right? That probably means we have nothing to worry about."

Ukyou was aware of Pandora's capabilities, as the other Sacred Treasures had already explained its abilities to him. The Arcana Kingdom had already undertaken the most optimal possible response to the crisis. Which meant that, as the sovereign of an allied country, his job was to trust in his allies. If the forces on site were motivated to fight, then the only thing those in charge should do would be to secure a way for them to retreat if they failed.

"…Look sharp, he's here!"

Saiga had looked into the future. The scene he had seen in his prophetic dream and the scene unfolding before him were exactly the same. In the cloud-darkened wastelands created by Shouzo's magic, a single figure appeared in the distance.

"He…has quite the presence."

"Yep, seems really strong!"

The man who approached with Vajra in hand had an aura of intense determination about him. His presence strengthened Tahlan's resolve while Ran, seeing no need to hold back, had let loose her Tainted Blood, her hair turning silver. Similarly, those aboard Noah tensed as they watched the man walk closer.

To put it in bald and perhaps cliched terms, the man exuded strength from his very appearance. In that sense, he was clearly different from any of the aces of the Great Houses. They all felt an immense power from him; that was the only way to describe the man. The master of the storm clouds that enveloped the entire kingdom simply oozed power from his entire being, overwhelming everything around him.

"…That power."

Saiga found himself daunted. Saiga had seen the man in his dream, but he was even more intimidating in person.

"Ohh, my master! You've come to retake me!" Vajra cried out. Unfortunately for her, she was unable to deny her powers to the man holding her and, while she could speak out, she was unable to return to her master's side. Still, she seemed moved at seeing her master aboard Noah.

"Vajra! Were you able to find out anything about him?" Ukyou boldly asked his Divine Spear for information from atop Noah's deck.

Everyone around him was a bit taken aback at just how pitilessly he demanded information from Vajra. It was true that she would be the only one who might know something about the mysterious man, but still, surely he could have at least offered some reassuring words first.

"Yes, I have some information! Such a task is child's play for a weapon of my greatness!"

The master of the storm clouds seemed unbothered by the prospect of information leaking to his enemy. He simply allowed Vajra to continue to speak.

“Indeed, with my brains it would be easy enough to come to the conclusion of…”

“I don’t even know where your brains are, and I honestly don’t care! Get on with it!”

“Sob… Alright, my master! And you, Eckesachs! Go get that idiot Immortal Suiboku over here right now! This man is from the same school as Suiboku!”

Saiga, who had been standing on guard with Eckesachs in hand, and Tahlan, who was guarding his flank, both looked over at the mysterious man in shock. Similarly, those aboard Noah who knew Sansui’s identity were also taken completely aback.

Even those who weren’t aware that Sansui was an Immortal had heard the name Suiboku before. Suiboku was Sansui’s master, the man that this kingdom’s greatest swordsman regarded as his superior and as the world’s greatest warrior.

“The same school as Suiboku? I’ve never even heard of such a man. Suiboku’s apprenticeship was at least twenty-five hundred years ago!”

“…Ah, so you are Eckesachs, the sword wielded by Suiboku. Indeed, I am Fukei. I, alongside Suiboku, learned the Immortal Arts under Master Kacho. I am four-thousand five-hundred years old. I’m about five hundred years older than him.”

The utter, ridiculous scale of the conversation meant that those present who didn’t know about Sansui and Suiboku’s immortality simply couldn’t wrap their heads around the sheer number of years being thrown about. At the same time, the fact that he was of the same school of Immortal as Sansui’s master had completely changed the mood of those gathered below.

“I have but one objective: Suiboku’s head. I have traveled this far to take that prize back to our homeland, and I will simply cut down any who stand in my way.”

Fukei’s identity and goals had been laid completely out into the open. The man and his vendetta had nothing to do with either the Arcana Kingdom or the Domino Republic.

“Screw that, you senile old geezer!” Ukyou, the one who had quietly acquiesced to the man’s demands, was the first to yell out in defiance. Even if it was an opponent who he seemed unlikely to defeat, he was moved to act. Even if his words had nothing else to back them up but his anger, he had to speak out.

“You invade my castle, you steal my Sacred Treasure, and THAT’S your goddamned reason?! These aren’t the untamed wilds! You don’t get to screw up human society over this crap!”

“…Lord Ukyou is correct. Fukei, I understand you have your reasons, but they are yours alone. We have no intention of simply abiding by your demands.”

Saiga had known through his prophetic dream that the man who took Vajra would appear here today. He was here to intercept that man, both to protect the Arcana Kingdom and to retake Vajra. Saiga’s plans hadn’t changed in the slightest after learning this new information. Even if the man was an Immortal, even if he was of the same school as Suiboku, that was no reason for him to pull back.

“We have no intention of letting you, a man who attacked an ally of the Arcana Kingdom and stole their Sacred Treasure, set foot into our kingdom.”

Suiboku lived in a forest near the royal capital. There was no way they could allow a dangerous man like Fukei to proceed unimpeded through the kingdom, and there was definitely no way they could let him unleash his powers in battle near the royal capital. Saiga also had his personal reasons not to let him through.

“While Suiboku didn’t directly pass Eckesachs to my hands, I’m still the apprentice of Suiboku’s apprentice, Sansui!” Saiga proudly declared, conveying that his swordsmanship was descended from Suiboku’s teachings. “Whatever your reasons, I can’t simply let you pass if your intention is to kill Master Suiboku!”

“The apprentice of Suiboku’s apprentice…? You, who aren’t even an Immortal?”

Even if they let Fukei pass unimpeded, Suiboku could probably do something about him. However, Saiga couldn’t let that happen, both from his own position as House Batterabbe’s heir and for the sake of his own feelings as Sansui’s apprentice. He needed to fight, and he needed to win. He couldn’t leave this to House Disaea’s ace.

“Agreed, Saiga, my brother… This is an unexpectedly powerful opponent…but we can’t simply let him pass.” Tahlan concurred with Saiga. Like Saiga, having met Suiboku, this was not an issue that Tahlan could concede. Tahlan wanted to protect the man who had rejoiced at his existence. The man who, despite being the world’s most powerful swordsman, had rejoiced at the fact that he, Tahlan, a mere swordsman, was Sansui’s apprentice.

“I don’t know about this Suiboku or whatever… But if it’s a strong opponent, I totally want a piece of that!”

To Ran, who was a berserker and a Marked, the details didn’t matter. There was an enemy in front of her, and that meant she wanted to fight. She had regained the simplicity of what had originally driven her.

“Mm… So, those who have grown from the teachings of Suiboku… A perfect foil to test my training.”

Ukyou observed Fukei closely, noting the Immortal’s bottomless confidence.

He needed to determine when to retreat, and quickly. He had recognized that he was the only one present who could objectively determine that timing.

“Just so you’re all aware, he’s probably consumed the Divine Ginseng! Just like the Marked, he’ll regenerate and revive whether you dismember him or burn him!” Eckesachs, who had been Suiboku’s weapon, yelled out tensely.

If their opponent was a combat focused Immortal, even at the very least he was going to be as powerful as the old Suiboku. Because she knew that Suiboku so intimately, Eckesachs had quickly discarded any overconfidence she may have felt earlier.

“Be on your guard! Don’t think he’ll go down easily!”

“Then allow me to go first. I’d appreciate a hand if I end up in too much trouble.”

With that, Tahlan, the one with the lowest combat ability of the three, stepped out in front.

“A-Are you sure, Tahlan?”

“As a wielder of Shadow Summoning, it’s only right that I take the lead. If anything, it’d be a problem were it any other way.”

At Saiga’s concern, Tahlan offered his gentle reassurance. Shadow Summoning was extremely useful in drawing attention and using duplicates as decoys, and it was reasonable that Tahlan, a master of Shadow Summoning, take the lead.

“…Alright. I leave it in your hands.”

While Saiga had some concerns about Tahlan’s physical abilities, he trusted Tahlan’s judgment. This was because Tahlan was his usual, calm, collected self, rather than appearing to be driven by anything like desperation.

Ran, who had wanted to be the first one to fight, seemed a bit put off by the fact that Tahlan was going first, but because it was Saiga’s decision, she accepted it with minimal complaint.

“…Sure. Just don’t count on me being patient.”

“Yes... Well, I don’t suppose I’ll last very long on my own, anyway.”

Fukei was an Immortal who had lived for over four thousand five hundred years and who, unlike Sansui, was fully trained in the Immortal Arts. Even Tahlan had to admit, with an amused, self-deprecating smile, that he was biting off a bit more than he could probably chew.

Whatever the mechanics of a skill, however the training method, fifteen hundred years of training would be enough to become strong, wouldn’t it?

Putting aside the question of whether he could win, Tahlan couldn’t simply choose not to fight. That just wasn’t something he was prepared to do. At the very least, he understood and believed in what Suiboku had meant. If time spent training was what determined who would win, then

there was no reason to fight. If that was all that determined the outcome, then strength was purely a matter of endurance.

Tahlan wasn't interested in dedicating his life to simply enduring his training. He wasn't interested in measuring who had the most tenacity. That was why Tahlan stepped forward. He, who was a mere master of Shadow Summoning, a mere master of the sword, and merely the representative of Sansui's students, stepped forward.

"I bear you no ill will, but such are the necessities of the mortal world. Your fate is to end upon my blade."

"...It would seem you're the most skilled of the three. Are you sure you should be going first?"

"Heh heh..."

He was most amused by Fukei's evaluation of their abilities. It appeared that Fukei thought highly of him. That also told Tahlan something else; Fukei was substantially different from Sansui and Suiboku.

"Unfortunately, I'm the weakest of those present here. To not see that, it seems your eyes are clouded."

Tahlan dropped into a middle stance with the sword that had accompanied him from his homeland. As he dropped into his stance, he replayed all that he had learned throughout his life.

In order to defeat him, Sansui had analyzed and dissected his Shadow Summoning. Having received instruction from that very same man, Tahlan could now use that instruction to study his opponent.

"...Oh?"

"I'm not that impressive a man, I assure you."

Fukei's fighting ability was at a level where he could be wounded by Guardsmen using magic, and he healed instantly, like a berserker.

"Heh."

Alas, that alone was enough to limit what Tahlan could actually accomplish. The major weakness of the Shadow Summoner was their lack of sheer firepower. That would serve to limit his options here, as well.

But even then... Even in spite of that...

"Then let us begin! I am Tahlan! Tahlan the lone swordsman!"

Tahlan had fled here from his homeland because he couldn't defeat Spirit Summoners. He had no intention of fleeing any further.

"Dance of the Funerary Procession!"

He sent a row of expendable duplicates in a single-file procession, keeping an eye on his distance from Fukei. Tahlan intended to start by putting Fukei on the defensive, in order to see how he would react.

"Shadows with mass, mm?"

Fukei swung Vajra as though nothing about the sight surprised him. The speed of his slashing attacks was clearly faster than a human being could ever manage. Fukei's swings easily split the duplicates, each as solid as a human being, cleanly in half. That meant that, like a berserker, Fukei was also enhancing his physical abilities.

Tahlan couldn’t help but smile, even as he realized he was facing an opponent who he had no chance of defeating.

“Dance of Interlocking Circles!”

Although he knew he couldn’t win, Tahlan had no intention of just letting Fukei kill him. Even with his enhanced physical abilities, Fukei had been wounded fighting the Sword Company, which meant there would be room for Tahlan to land an attack.

The ten duplicates Tahlan unleashed moved to encircle Fukei, then simply executed a suicide charge with the intention of stabbing their enemy.

Fukei dodged the simple, but lethal attack by leaping straight into the air.

“Is that all?”

He easily cleared the duplicates, each of which were as tall as Tahlan himself. As he came down from his jump, Fukei swung downward with his spear. Tahlan felt a prickle of cold sweat down his back as he imagined the sheer power behind that swing, but he, of course, had no intention of letting it kill him.

“No, no, not at all.”

The maneuver was artless, but Tahlan rolled forward, avoiding the blow by ducking low and keeping close to the ground.

“…Ah.”

Fukei seemed impressed as he landed where Tahlan had stood just a split-second before.

“Based upon your swing earlier, you seem quite skilled. Further, you’re swift and strong. But your tactics are sloppy. It appears you view me as your inferior.”

As he dropped back into his stance, Tahlan continued his analysis of his opponent. Fukei was certainly fast, but he wasn’t as fast as a Spirit Summoner or Ran. He was also skilled, but that skill wasn’t in a realm that was beyond comprehension.

More than anything, Fukei wasn’t reading Tahlan’s movements well. In escaping an encirclement, leaping upward was probably the best solution. Attacking the Shadow Summoner outside of that encirclement was also correct in terms of tactics.

But that’s where his read of the situation had ended. While it could be charitably described as comfortably taking his time, Fukei had only watched as Tahlan dodged his attack, making no effort to follow it up.

“You’re strong...but not so strong that I can do nothing against you.”

“You have an overactive tongue.”

Tahlan’s opponent remained unfazed, seeming completely unconcerned with his attacks being dodged and the criticism of his lack of tactics.

After a moment’s pause, Fukei dropped into a slight stance. He seemed focused, like he was preparing something.

“Then how about this?”

Immediately after Fukei disappeared from Tahlan's line of sight, everyone present knew what had happened.

"Dance of Separation!"

Everyone other than Tahlan saw the moment that Fukei appeared behind Tahlan using Flash Step. Fukei raised Vajra above his head and charged into Tahlan. Tahlan leapt forward without so much as a glance back, summoning a duplicate behind himself to tackle the approaching Fukei.

Despite being tackled by something the size of a grown man, Fukei didn't so much as bat an eye, maintaining his stance as he continued his attack. However, the diagonal slash he had loosed with his spear missed and cut through empty space as Tahlan dodged the attack.

"…I see, you knew of the Flash Step. I should have known."

"No, that's the first time I've seen *that* Flash Step."

Fukei's Flash Step had a clear setup motion. There was a moment of preparation that wasn't required with the Flash Step that Sansui had learned from Suiboku, the Flash Step that Suiboku had elevated into a further art.

"I see, so this is the original Flash Step."

Tahlan felt a surge of admiration for Suiboku. Tahlan had experienced first-hand just how important the things Suiboku had eliminated from his Immortal Arts techniques were in combat.

He had not understood what Eckesachs had meant by her explanation that Suiboku must have eliminated all but the bare necessities, but now he knew. The fact that Fukei needed to prepare to use Flash Step had given him time to defend himself. If Fukei could use Flash Step without any preparation at all, like Sansui could, Tahlan couldn't say for certain that he would have come away from that unscathed.

"I'm afraid I made quite a show of jumping and leaping, but I was able to land a blow, at least. It seems you're quite durable. Further, you're quite heavy."

The duplicate that had shoulder-tackled Fukei had also stabbed him in the stomach. It was a simple, powerful attack that would ordinarily have been a lethal blow. Yet, despite taking that blow, Fukei hadn't moved. It wasn't that he wasn't affected by the attack, it was that the attack literally hadn't moved his person.

"I suppose it's like a Leaden Body. You made yourself heavier to increase the impact of your attacks."

"Mm… It seems your style is indeed descended from Suiboku's teachings."

Fukei remained as unfazed as ever, despite the fact that he, a man who had spent practically an eternity training, had allowed an opponent that hadn't lived for even a hundred years to draw first blood. He was completely unfazed.

Fukei's bearing even seemed to suggest that was perfectly normal. That attitude made him seem all the more eerie to those watching the battle from

aboard Noah. The same attitude, however, made the three facing him determined to defeat him all the more.

“Durability would be Harden Self. Speed would be Blink Step. Strength would be Strengthen Self. Even Suiboku struggled to wield all of those at once…”

Eckesachs, Suiboku’s former partner, had been able to discern all of that by watching Fukei’s skirmish with Tahlan. Yes, Fukei’s Flash Step was the one that she herself remembered from her days with Suiboku. That meant that he must be from the same school as Suiboku. He was a powerful opponent, one who may very well be more powerful than Suiboku had been when he abandoned her.

“How absurd…”

Tahlan could only briefly shake his head at Eckesachs’s helpful analysis. It had dawned on him just how much of a monster that the man in front of him was, and just how much of a monster the Suiboku of old had been. Skill with the spear; a physically hardened, fast and strong body; a technique that let him close the distance instantly; and regenerative abilities to boot. In Suiboku’s case, he also had Eckesachs boosting all of those abilities. No wonder he was considered powerful.

“But I can still put up a fight… That I can still fight him…I suppose that means I’ve gotten a little bit better.”

Tahlan’s training in his homeland, the training he’d received from Sansui: all of it had meant something. He was at least able to put up a fight against a monster who had trained since time immemorial. He wasn’t a burden on his comrades, but rather a vital member of this group. Tahlan savored that realization as he put some distance between himself and Fukei.

Watching Tahlan, the warriors aboard Noah felt a similar shiver of realization. A man who was of the same school as Sansui’s master and the man who was, in essence, their representative as students of Sansui, were fighting each other below them. And while Tahlan hadn’t landed a fatal blow, he had still managed to land *a* blow. Sansui’s students realized that their lives, their effort, all had meaning, and that their training under Sansui’s instruction had purpose. Seeing Tahlan prove that moved them with a deep, heartfelt joy.

“All of you, stay on your guard! Given that this man is of the same school as Suiboku, if you treat him as an inferior version of Sansui, he’ll most certainly kill you! He has yet to make use of Vajra’s powers or any real Immortal Arts!” Eckesachs shouted out to return her allies to the present, having felt their tension lessen.

“Given the storm clouds in the skies, this is still his stage! Even if his target is Suiboku, don’t think he’ll hold back! Consider the wind, the rain, and lightning all as tools at his disposal!”

Eckesachs knew the Suiboku of twenty-five hundred years ago. This man, Fukei, must have come out of his isolation because he felt he had a chance against a Suiboku who had grown even stronger in that time.

“This man is here because he feels he’s ready to kill Suiboku!”

Hearing her words, the three of them understood. Eckesachs probably wanted them to run. Perhaps it was because she was a tool and had to fulfill her purpose, or perhaps it was her pride as the Ultimate Legendary Sword, but she couldn’t directly tell them to run.

“Alright, Eckesachs.”

The fact that Tahlan, the weakest among them, was able to put up a fight...it meant that his opponent was taking it easy on them. Saiga offered his thanks to that warning given to him by Eckesachs as he stepped forward.

“From here on out, I’ll lead.”

Just as Eckesachs couldn’t tell them to run, Saiga and company couldn’t bring themselves to do such a thing.

“...Very well.”

Eckesachs knew that as well. To turn and run against an opponent against whom they had little chance of winning was far from the pursuit of being the strongest.

“I’m Mizu Saiga, the wielder of Eckesachs and heir to House Batterabbe. I will slay you and reclaim Vajra.”

“Hrmph.”

As Saiga approached with a determined look, Fukei didn’t hide his contempt. It’s true that there was an enormous gap in experience, but even accounting for that, Saiga was still immature. Just holding a sword, it was understandable that he’d look weaker than Tahlan.

Saiga himself understood that well. He knew that, as a swordsman, he was weaker than any of the warriors who were aboard Noah at this very moment. That was why he wasn’t angry at being underestimated, nor did he have any intention of proving himself to Fukei.

No, all Saiga was going to do was do what he needed to win. He would do his duty and save the Arcana Kingdom. That was all that was on his mind as he stepped forward.

“Saiga...”

Watching him, Happine, Zuger, and Sunae fought conflicting feelings within them. Pride that he was bravely facing a powerful enemy. Worry at the fact the man they loved was walking into danger. But the three aboard Noah could only pray and watch as the fight unfolded.

“You sure about this?”

The warriors aboard the ship also seemed uncertain. There were those who couldn’t help but voice their concern for his safety. Of course, they all felt respect for Saiga as he stepped toward battle. They all felt that the foreigner who had become the heir to a Great House was behaving in a manner befitting such a position.

But that was also why they were worried about him. Could he actually win in a fight against an Immortal older than Suiboku? They were worried that he would simply be struck down without offering any real resistance.

“Is that Saiga…actually strong?”

“Even if he has Eckesachs… With the Mystic Arts alone…”

As the ace of House Batterabbe, Saiga didn’t have a nickname or an alias. That was because everyone believed that he was simply a mystic who wielded a Legendary Blade. He fought with Mystic Armor, reinforced by the power of the Legendary Sword, so it was natural that he was strong. However, that seemed so very plain compared to the other aces of the Great Houses.

Shirokuro Sansui, the Young Sword Apostle, the strongest swordsman, a warrior who everyone in the upper echelons of the Arcana Kingdom regarded as the greatest in the land.

Shouzo Okabe, the Scarred Fool, the ultimate mage, who could move the heavens and the earth itself and reshape them in his image.

Ukyou Fuushi, the Foreign Dictator, the man with five of the Eight Sacred Treasures, who had brought down the Domino Empire.

Shun Ukiyo, the Thinking Man, the perfect wielder of Pandora, the Armor of Disaster.

Those aboard Noah couldn’t help but wonder if Saiga was worthy of being compared to those other four.

“Are you sure he’ll be alright, Happine?” Paulette could only ask as Happine offered up her prayers. It was understandable that Paulette would be worried that Saiga wouldn’t be able to handle fighting an opponent as ridiculous as an Immortal who had come to kill Suiboku.

“Yes, he’ll be fine, Paulette. Saiga is…strong.”

Happine believed in Saiga, even as she hoped for his success.

“Yes, he’s strong.”

Sunae nodded in agreement. Saiga was, without a doubt, the strongest of the three below.

Saiga prepared to go into battle, bearing the heavy burden of expectations upon his shoulders. Tahlan’s initial skirmish had revealed Fukei’s fighting style, which allowed Saiga to form the outline of a way to fight against Fukei. It wasn’t like the time that he had fought Sansui, confident in his own power and without a clear plan in mind. It was precisely because he wasn’t allowed to lose here, that he intended to fight to win.

“Ran, Tahlan. I’ll lead.”

With Eckesachs in hand, Saiga began his precognition. By using the Celestial Blood, also known as Time Power, he sought out the most optimal action that he could take. And then…

“Haaaaaaaaaaah!”

Saiga used his Holy Power to create armor to protect himself, and Royal Presence to give himself animal traits. His Mana ignited a flame around his sword and his Tainted Blood strengthened his physical abilities. All of these powers were amplified by Eckesachs’s ability.

“…What is this power?”

There were far too many effects happening all in parallel. In addition to Fukei, those who didn't know about Saiga's actual powers were completely caught by surprise.

"Raaaaaaah!"

The influence of his Tainted Blood suddenly drove Saiga into a state of heightened emotion. The swordsman encased in golden glowing armor, with flaming silver fur, lunged at Fukei with a shout.

"Mrrph!"

The flaming blade of the Legendary Sword came at Fukei in a blinding flash. Faced with that attack, Fukei tried to block it using Vajra.

"Graaaaaah!"

Vajra and Eckesachs clashed. The legendary weapons crafted by God himself both survived the impact between these two figurative titans without damage.

But Vajra's haft was unable to stop the flames enveloping Eckesachs, and Fukei took a direct blast. Further, the sheer physical power behind Saiga's blow was enough to throw even the weight-enhanced Fukei backward.

"How is that...?!"

Immortals were unaffected by natural fire, but magical fire could still wound them. There was no way that Fukei could avoid injury after being exposed to magical flames amplified by Eckesachs. He suffered burns on his entire body that would have killed an ordinary man.

"Ki Wave."

Fukei, who had been consumed by flames as he was blasted backward, let loose his ki in mid-air. The flames that had engulfed him were swept away and all that remained were the painful-looking burns.

"How is what?"

Even the last trace of those burns had healed without a trace moments later. By the time he landed on his feet, Fukei had healed and appeared exactly as he had been before Saiga's attack.

"Do you truly think one who isn't an Immortal can actually affect me?" Fukei said with a calm confidence, as though nothing had happened to him.

"Yes, I think so," Saiga said without hesitation, unfazed by his opponent's seeming invincibility.

He deactivated his Tainted Blood and Royal Presence for the moment, cooling off his thoughts. As he calmed his excited nerves, he carefully observed his enemy.

He's...weaker than I expected. In close combat, Ran's stronger than he is.

Regeneration, self-enhancement, and spear techniques. While that combination made Fukei strong, at the moment, he was little better than an inferior version of Ran. However, that was only because Fukei was underestimating him. If he began to truly wield the weather as his weapon, no doubt Saiga and his friends would be immediately overwhelmed.

As the Testudo Style Book of Secrets said, there was no way to deal with an opponent who could cause natural disasters.

So long as he underestimates us, we can keep attacking him.

Fukei underestimated them and was overconfident. As such, the only thing to do was to kill him before he decided to get serious. As his opponent watched him, Saiga put together his plans to achieve victory.

After learning we're apprentices of Master Suiboku's apprentice, he's watching how we move. That's why he's not attacking.

While Sansui could craft a perfect set of tactics in the middle of a fight, Saiga didn't feel himself up to that challenge, which was why he considered the current lull his last chance to give the matter serious thought, and thus sought out the best way to follow up on his attacks.

Can't use the tactic Sunae used against Ran. That only worked because Ran didn't know her own limits, so there's no way that'll work against an Immortal who's spent centuries training. Besides, giving him a chance to respond... He could very well escape using Flash Step.

Saiga came upon the worst case scenario as he considered the situation and shuddered. If Fukei didn't consider himself a warrior, there was no reason for him to stand and fight Saiga. He could simply move himself far away using Flash Step and leave Saiga and company with no options.

Then we can't afford to let him use Flash Step. If we keep up a constant attack against him, he shouldn't be able to use Flash Step.

Fortunately for Saiga, Fukei's Flash Step had a setup motion that Sansui's lacked. So long as they continued attacking him, Fukei couldn't escape.

"We'll push ahead and attack, Eckesachs!"

"...Yes. If we can't push forward here, we'll lose!"

Saiga used his Divination, or perhaps his Testudo Style, his ability to see the future, to come up with a set of tactics that would create a specific outcome. It was a kind of formlessness that was best suited for the current situation. Of course, it was far from perfect, but it was more than enough for Saiga as he currently stood.

"Raaaaaahhh!"

Saiga once again brought forth his physical enhancements and began running at full speed. He was literally faster than the eye could follow, able to instantly close the distance between himself and Fukei, who he had blasted a fair distance away with his last blow.

"Enough... Living Earth, Cave In!"

Suddenly, Saiga's body became heavier, and the ground itself was in danger of collapsing under his weight. If that happened, fighting would be the least of his concerns, no matter how enhanced his physical abilities were.

Fortunately, he had already foreseen Fukei's use of the technique. While Sansui could only make educated guesses about the future, Saiga was able to see it clearly.

“You shouldn’t…underestimate me!”

The precision of Saiga’s fire magic was strengthened because of the increased focus provided by his Tainted Blood. By emitting it from his back, he switched from running to low-altitude flight.

“What?!”

Saiga began flying at the exact same moment that Fukei executed his technique. Fukei paused, caught off guard at how quickly and confidently Saiga had switched tacks. That brief moment of hesitation was lethal in high-speed close combat. With his weight increased by Fukei’s technique, Saiga put all that mass behind an overhead slash directed down at the Immortal.

“Grrr!”

“Gaaaaaah!”

Fukei blocked the attack with Vajra, but the increased weight of the blow caused the spear to scream.

“Living Earth, Levitation!”

Fukei responded by canceling the technique that increased Saiga’s weight, replacing it with one that made him lighter instead. Saiga’s attack immediately lost its impact and Fukei promptly attempted to bat him into the distance.

“Not a chance!”

Saiga used his fire magic to control his positioning even as he floated up into the air.

“Mist Shadow Style, Flame Wall!”

As he swung Eckesachs in a wide arc, Saiga generated a blast of flame so large that it threatened to swallow him along with his target. Even if Fukei could regenerate, the flames would still harm him. The moment he was about to be swallowed by those flames, Fukei briefly closed his eyes.

“…What’s this?!”

Despite the fact that he was engulfed in flame, Fukei felt no heat. In fact, far from feeling any heat, he didn’t even see any light from the flames through his closed eyelids. As he opened his eyes and glanced around he saw that there was only something that looked like flame around him. The flames didn’t even lighten the cloud-covered darkness.

“A mere illusion…?”

“Got you!”

As Fukei was momentarily taken by surprise, Saiga seized his chance. He grabbed the arm that was holding Vajra and tried to pry her from Fukei’s grasp.

“Damn you!”

The threat to his possession of Vajra was enough to break Fukei’s calm. It was the one thing that he feared in this battle. It was because of this fear that he responded with anger and tried to throw Saiga off his arm. Fukei deactivated the technique that had lowered the gravity around him and slammed Saiga downward.

“…What?! He vanished? The same duplicate as earlier?!”

The Saiga grabbing his arm vanished the moment it hit the ground. The sheer volume of techniques used by Saiga had left Fukei scrambling to keep up.

“Exactly!”

With his return to his normal weight, Saiga was able to move normally. He resumed his melee attacks with his flaming sword. Caught off balance, Fukei was assailed by flaming slashes.

“You dare?!”

Still, Fukei’s body continued to regenerate, and he attempted to counterattack against Saiga’s overwhelming flurry.

“Damn! Even with all this, he’s still kicking!”

“But even he has his limits. Continue your attacks!”

“Got it!”

“You won’t have a chance! The Shifting Heavens…”

Fukei’s façade of calm was broken and in a rage he attempted to target Saiga with a large-scale attack.

“Hiyaaaah!”

Ran landed a kick against the back of his head.

“Guh!”

“Even if you heal, you can’t use your techniques when your head’s being bashed in, can you?”

Incorporating her own experience with taking blows to the head, Ran, who had wanted to fight more than anyone, continued with a flurry of strikes.

“Hah! Hah! Hah!”

Ran had always had more stamina than anyone, even surpassing Saiga. She continued to rain blow after blow on the defenseless Fukei.

“G-Grrrah!”

“Don’t bother! I’ve already figured out your moves!”

Fukei tried desperately to counterattack using Vajra, but he could put up little resistance against Ran.

“If you can’t escape with Flash Step… I can win, even against an Immortal!”

Unlike Saiga, Ran’s attacks continued without a moment’s pause. She was able to precisely target Fukei’s body and inflict damage so quickly that his regeneration wasn’t keeping up.

“Haha! What’s wrong, hmm? I don’t know how many thousand years you’ve lived, but you’re way weaker than Sansui!”

A blow to the head would interrupt Fukei’s attempts to use an Immortal technique, but if Ran focused all her attacks on his head, he’d eventually be able to block her attacks. That was why she spread her blows across his body and limbs, keeping him from focusing his defenses on any single point.

“That is…*ENOUGH!*”

Despite the blows landing on his head, Fukei released an enormous Ki Wave from his entire body. Ordinarily, the Ki Wave could only affect a target that the wielder was touching, but this was strong enough that it rattled Ran's entire body from just being in proximity to Fukei.

"Grr...!"

Ran had just caught herself getting overconfident when Fukei's burst of rage at her attitude manifested, and she mentally chastised herself. She had gotten caught up beating up on an opponent that used the same techniques as Sansui as a way to vent her frustration at having lost previously.

"I'll learn from that, but I don't regret it."

"You damned Marked!"

With Ran briefly flat-footed, Fukei tried to land a follow-up blow. He tried to break open her skull with an overhand swing of Vajra, but the attack was blocked mid-strike.

"I'm afraid I'm going to cut in."

"My apologies, but I'm afraid we're not fighting alone."

One of Tahlan's duplicates picked up the flat-footed Ran and moved away from the melee. Of course, that wasn't the only thing Tahlan's duplicates were doing.

"Dance of the Iron Spike!"

Two of Tahlan's duplicates attacked Fukei from behind. Their targets were the most vulnerable spot on the Immortal: the tops of his feet. The duplicates stabbed at Fukei's feet with all of their strength, pinning them to the ground.

"I may be weak, but it seems even I can pierce the flesh of your feet."

"Nraaaaaaagh!"

Just like when faced with Ran's flurry, Fukei erased the duplicates by unleashing a Ki Wave in every direction. Unfortunately for Fukei, Tahlan himself had long since gotten out of range.

"The strength of the Shadow Summoner is that his shadows are expendable. I imagine my easily defeated shadows are grating on your nerves?"

"Aaaand I'm back!"

The area-effect version of Ki Wave had a small effective range. It was also not a particularly strong attack, and for a berserker like Ran, the wounds it inflicted healed in a matter of seconds.

"Must be hard to have only one body and no friends!"

"Agreed!"

Ran was able to rain down an unceasing flurry of blows while Tahlan could use multiple duplicates to attack from many different angles at once. Escape was nearly impossible once the two of them cornered a target. With only one body practicing them, Fukei's Immortal Arts weren't able to respond to the sheer number of attacks directed at him.

"Grrr...Naaaagh!"

Fukei further tightened his grip upon Vajra. He burned with rage that he had spent an eternity training and yet was being stopped from facing his nemesis.

“Graaaaah!”

Countless bolts of lightning streaked through the storm clouds above. They weren’t triggered by Fukei’s Immortal Arts, but rather by Vajra’s abilities having been magnified, fed by the sudden burst of emotion from her wielder.

“Tch!”

Tahlan and Ran immediately came to the same conclusion: they couldn’t let this man use his weather-controlling power. If they gave Fukei an opening to use such a technique, he would use it to sweep them away using a natural disaster.

They needed to hurry up and end the battle. They needed to make certain that they killed him.

“Step back, you two.”

Saiga, who had evidently regained his breath, once again loosed a slashing attack against Fukei. Tahlan and Ran answered Saiga by quickly retreating from the area.

“Duplicate? Real? It doesn’t matter! There’s no meaning to anything you do!”

Fukei felt nothing but pure, unadulterated rage at the fact that he was struggling against opponents that he considered his inferiors. He didn’t have a trace of fear about dying or losing.

“You’re wrong!”

Saiga disputed his opponent’s belief by stating his own. It was a clash between deeply held principles, a conflict about the justness of their causes, their dignity, and their worth as individuals. That clash served to fuel and accelerate the violence.

“We’ve worked hard to get stronger! We’ve desperately struggled to figure out what we can do! None of it is meaningless!”

Tahlan, Ran, and Saiga… If any of them had simply relied on their talent and been satisfied with being stronger than average, none of them would have reached the heights that they had now attained.

“Considering how well you can talk, you must be the real one.”

Saiga alone couldn’t match the sheer number of attacks that Ran and Tahlan had unleashed.

Fukei once again triggered the technique that increased the gravity around him and Saiga almost sank into the ground a second time. The effect was substantially stronger than earlier.

“No, this is a duplicate!”

Even as he fell to his knees, Saiga grinned. Seeing that, Fukei raised Vajra over his head and looked around. A short distance away he saw Saiga with his eyes closed, focused on controlling his duplicate.

“That reminds me…you can control the skies and the earth, but you haven’t noticed yet?”

And Saiga had already finished his preparations.

“What is this…?”

Fukei came to a late realization. The ground around him had clearly changed in color. It wasn’t just the stains from the blood he had shed, but rather from some sort of Art.

“Bursting Venom Style. A Rare Art, a martial art that makes things I touch explode. I prepared the ground around here while you were busy with the two of them.”

With enough preparation and Eckesachs’s enhancements, Bursting Venom Style could surpass even fire magic in sheer effectiveness.

“Pointless… Why bother to explain?”

Flash Step would be enough to escape the blast, but as Fukei attempted to retreat, he fell to one knee.

“W-What is this? My body…”

“Drunken Fist Style. It’s a technique that disrupts the sense of balance of those around the wielder. I’m using it with this duplicate. Works pretty well at this range, doesn’t it?”

“Grr, then…”

All Fukei needed to do was kill the duplicate before he completely lost his sense of balance. He forced his disoriented body to move, trying to strike the copy down, but he never got the opportunity.

“Burst.”

Fukei’s arm, a piece of his actual body, exploded.

“W-What?!”

“The first time I grabbed on to your arm, I used Bursting Venom Style. Coming from your own limb…it’s closer than point-blank range.”

Fukei had lost not just his arm, but half of his body. Having confirmed that, Saiga’s duplicate smiled in satisfaction and vanished.

“Burst again.”

The ground that Fukei was standing on exploded in an enormous torrent of fire. It was more than enough force to completely demolish Fukei’s already damaged body.

Part 21 — Heaven and Earth

“Suiboku, what’s gotten into you?! You’re going to leave Master Kacho and go train under another Immortal?”

“Yes, I’m going to study alchemy. It’s not as though I have a choice, since our Master isn’t particularly skilled in that field.”

“That’s not the point! You don’t understand what it means to be an Immortal! You seem to be under the illusion that an Immortal is simply one who uses the Immortal Arts! But the True Immortal Arts, the true way of the Immortal, is to seek out harmony with nature! You’re drunk off your talent and getting lost in your techniques!”

“Hahaha! That simply sounds like the yapping of a cur that has neither the talent nor the technique to drown in. I’m embarrassed for you, Fukei! Besides, the reason I’m learning the Immortal Arts is so that I become the strongest man in history! I have no time for your rambling!”

“How dare you?! I can’t simply let you leave and use the holy Immortal Arts for something as undignified as conflict! I’ll stop you, in the name of our Master Kacho!”

“Hahaha! Fukei, do you seriously think you can defeat me?”

Having witnessed the overwhelming combat ability of Mizu Saiga, House Batterabbe’s ace, those aboard Noah fell into a shocked silence. In a sense, Saiga was an existence as or even more ridiculous than Shouzo.

“That’s Saiga. He has the talent for all of the Arts; not just mysticism, but *all* of the Rare Arts. The more Arts he learns, the stronger he becomes. If you add Eckesachs to that, then…”

There was perhaps nothing more terrifying to the denizens of this world. Even the most talented individual only had the ability to wield a single Art, but Saiga was able to use every single one in existence.

“Saiga has enough power to be regarded as an ace,” Happine said, shivering at the power of the man she’d chosen, looking out over the land that had exploded.

Saiga’s approach had shown a basic understanding of tactics, using the necessary Art at the necessary time, rather than simply using his various Arts at random. He hadn’t won through dumb chance, and it hadn’t been an easy victory. Saiga, Ran, and Tahlan had faced a superior opponent, cut off his ability to fight, and made certain to finish him off.

“Saiga…is as good as any of the other aces.”

“Yes. He really has grown…”

Zuger couldn’t help tearing up at hearing Happine’s words. She was moved by the fact that Saiga’s setbacks and efforts hadn’t been for nothing. Saiga would never have been able to obtain this level of strength had he remained as reliant on his talent as he had in the beginning. It was because he had faced setbacks and disappointment, and picked himself up

afterwards, that he was able to overcome his weaknesses. That was what had made it possible for him to grow.

“My brother and Ran also did well… Most impressive,” Sunae said, praising not just Saiga, but Tahlan and Ran, as well.

It was true that this would have been a far chancier battle if Saiga had been alone. Tahlan and Ran had each carried their own weight throughout. The three of them had managed not only to avoid getting in one another’s way, but had seamlessly covered and supported one another. Again, that was not a matter of talent, but rather the fruits of their efforts.

“Yes, that’s true… Well done, Master Tahlan.”

The warriors who had trained with Tahlan were also deeply moved. Tahlan, who was the one who might be described as the most ordinary among the three, had held his own and contributed to the battle. Tahlan hadn’t stepped on the battlefield to die, to be protected by his allies, or to embarrass himself. His participation had worth and it had meaning.

“You know, I was worried when I heard he was from the same school as Suiboku, but it seems he wasn’t as tough as we thought. But, well, at least it’s all over now. Shall we go pick those three up?” Douve, who attempted to maintain a façade of nonchalance, still had an expression of relief and happiness on her features.

“Wait! It’s not over yet!” Dainsleif said with a look of shock. “He’s still alive!”

Dainsleif, who could detect his enemies, reported Fukei’s survival, even though she herself didn’t seem to quite believe it. There was no way that Fukei was still alive. He had taken so much punishment that it was hard to think there were even pieces of him scattered around the wastelands. Many of those listening to Dainsleif couldn’t believe her words.

“Hey, Shouzo. This feels like one of *those*, doesn’t it?”

“Yup, definitely feels like that.”

Ukyou and Shouzo, who had been watching the proceedings with a certain amount of detachment, now felt a prickle of fear run up their spines.

“I’ve seen this sort of scene develop in both manga and light novels, where the really powerful character is holding back and was underestimating his opponents.”

“Yeah. The whole ‘this isn’t even my final form’ thing, right?”

For better or for worse, neither Shouzo nor Ukyou saw things through the lens of what passed for accepted wisdom in this world. As such, because they weren’t restrained by accepted wisdom, they hadn’t automatically assumed that the battle was over like the natives had.

“…Whoa?! He’s really using his Immortal Arts! The atmospheric pressure’s falling all around, and the temperature’s in free fall, too!”

Noah, who was carrying them, also felt the danger around them. The Immortal who had the power to freely manipulate the heavens and earth was about to unleash his Art upon the world.

The three on the ground didn't hear the commotion aboard Noah. There was a fair amount of distance separating the three from the ship in the distance; further, they were situated in an open wasteland, and the massive explosion had temporarily deafened them.

"Somehow managed to push through..."

Saiga was breathing heavily. Because he had been fighting with all his strength, he was also thoroughly exhausted. Had they not been able to finish the battle quickly, they might very well have lost. The issue of fatigue was the same for Tahlan. Ran was the only one who seemed unfazed.

"Given how he was able to withstand my kicks, he was pretty tough. But that's all he was. He wasn't so much that I couldn't handle him."

"I felt it several times through the fight, but he seemed a step slow. Compared to Master Sansui, he was far too lax in allowing us to attack. He seemed to get fixated too easily on a target and wasn't making the best of his presence-sensing abilities."

That was perhaps how Sansui looked at all of them. The three of them had realized that it wasn't just that all Immortals were powerful, but that Sansui and Suiboku were especially so.

"Putting that much effort into it should wear out the power of the Divine Ginseng. Now we just need to recover Vajra and the battle is over..."

"...No, he's coming!"

As if triggered by Eckesachs's words of relief, Saiga saw the worst possible future pop up in his mind's eye. He immediately created a glowing shield large enough to surround everyone using his Mystic Arts.

A moment later, an enormous flood of water that seemed to have been poured out of an unthinkably large bucket fell onto the wastelands. The water rained down both on Noah and the three on the ground.

"Guh...!"

Saiga desperately held his Mystic Wall against the enormous weight pouring down on them from above. If he couldn't hold the water back, all three of them would quickly be crushed beneath the pressure and then swept away in the current. It was because his precognition had shown him that image that he was doing everything he could to hold on.

"Are you alright, Saiga?!"

"Y-Yeah... It'll hold...for now!"

Before Saiga's endurance reached its limit, the enormous downpour of water stopped. Even more exhausted than a moment before, Saiga made a point of deactivating the wall of light.

"Uh oh... I've used too much Holy Power..."

The three on the ground saw that the arid wastelands they had been standing in a moment ago had been transformed into a mud-ridden swamp. The rush of water had literally, rather than figuratively, altered the terrain itself.

"...Is this truly the work of a human?"

"So this is the true power of an Immortal who can control the heavens..."

Ran and Tahlan stared in shock at the sheer amount of destructive power that had been unleashed against them. The Bursting Venom Style technique that Saiga had used earlier was almost impossibly powerful, but the flash flood had washed away all traces of that destruction. The sheer volume of water had even almost erased the scars that Shouzo had left on the land.

"...This was the power the Testudo Style had feared."

Weather phenomena that were far beyond the limit of human beings to deal with... The three of them had not only made an enemy of the man who could wield the power of natural disasters as he pleased, but they had thoroughly enraged him. That realization made the three of them shudder.

"You're all rather well trained. I had intended only to see what you were capable of doing, but I didn't expect to take quite this much damage. I hadn't believed that I had been neglecting my mortal techniques."

Standing there was Fukei, looking as though he had never been harmed. With Vajra in hand and surrounded by tornadoes, he appeared to be the master of the heavens and the earth. He had regained the confident nonchalance he had momentarily lost as he showed off the sheer gap in strength that had existed from the very start of the fight.

"I didn't think you would do so well, even accounting for the fact that there were three of you against me alone, or with your various abilities. I see why Suiboku's apprentice considered you worthy students."

There was no way that Fukei wasn't angry, but he seemed to have his anger under control. Unlike earlier, he was carefully studying Saiga, Tahlan, and Ran. While still angry, he had regained his calm, and from his observations, he speculated on Suiboku's current situation.

"Still... I see Suiboku has fallen far. Further than I thought possible."

From Fukei's point of view, he was simply stating his opinion. But to Tahlan and Saiga, his words were an unforgivable insult.

"I don't know how much he's improved his skills, but it seems he's done what no Immortal should do and made a name for himself in the mortal world, gaining worldly status and fame. Then, despite his own lack of mastery, he took on an apprentice, then forced his apprentice to take apprentices himself to curry favor with the mortal kingdoms."

It was true that from what Tahlan and Saiga understood of Immortals, siding with authority wasn't something that was smiled upon. But both Suiboku and Sansui were humble and admirable men. They couldn't stand the fact that a man who would attack a mortal man's castle and steal his treasure was now insulting Suiboku's name.

"...Then I have no choice but to kill him."

"No choice at all but to kill him by my own hand."

But Tahlan and Saiga's anger was wholly meaningless, even as rage filled their thoughts. They had no way of communicating or expressing that anger to an opponent who was vastly more powerful than they were.

The small tornadoes that had formed around Fukei began to gather, masking him within the funnel cloud as they combined into a much larger twister.

“Blast! All of you, get away from him now!” Eckesachs, who had once been wielded by Suiboku, said. She knew immediately what Fukei was trying to do, likely using a combination of Vajra and his Immortal Arts.

The three turned their backs to the Immortal and began running. As Tahlan had less physical ability than the other two, Saiga pulled him by the arm to try to help him keep pace.

“Ugh… My ears hurt! What’s going on?!”

Ran held her hands over her ears. With her heightened senses, she more than anyone felt the changes in the environment around her. Still, it wasn’t as though knowing what was happening would let her do anything about it. Faced with the reality that a giant tornado had sprung up around Fukei and that the storm clouds above had started spinning quickly in a swirl, she, as a mere human, was powerless before it.

“Listen, ignore what’s happening behind you! That tornado isn’t there to attack you! The air around us is being sucked up into it! His intention is to send down the hail he’s preparing in the clouds to ride the flow of wind in toward the tornado!”

“No wonder it’s cold…!”

The storm clouds that had covered the entire kingdom for the last several days were so thick that they blocked out the sun. That had caused the temperature in the Arcana Kingdom and the Domino Republic to fall. But it was now rapidly getting even colder.

“The drop in temperature will work to his advantage! Even if he can’t freeze you, it’s easy for him to use the cold to make you more sluggish! Just focus on getting away from that tornado for now!”

“…Eckesachs! My precognition says that the ground will lift up and get sucked into the twister!”

“What?! That’s impossible! The Floating Isles should be a grand-scale technique that can only be used when in a familiar land! Even if he had consumed a Coiled Peach, there should still be limits!”

Completely ignoring Eckesachs’s disbelief, parts of the ground begin floating as it had in Saiga’s vision. It wasn’t that the entire ground was rising up all at once, but rather that chunks large enough for a person or two to stand upon were being lifted out of the ground, making the already muddy terrain even more difficult to run across.

“Get out of there! He’s about to…”

“It’s here!”

Just as Eckesachs had warned, hailstones the size of human heads started falling from above. The scale of the hailstorm could only be described as a natural disaster. The ice balls, large enough to tear straight through a building’s roof or damage a castle wall, were powerful enough

that a single direct hit would mean immediate death to a normal human being.

“Grr... Dammit! Jump into the holes left by the floating boulders! This technique won’t pull up earth from below ground level! Once it takes the surface from a location, that area should be a safe zone!”

In the constantly evolving threat environment, Eckesachs presented an option that Saiga hadn’t been able to see through his precognition.

“...But surely the enemy is aware of the holes that his technique leaves behind.”

“That’s right. You sure he’s not just going to follow up when we get in them?”

“Either way, we’re done if we stay out in the open! Just get in already!”

Saiga convinced Tahlan and Ran to overcome their reluctance and they all jumped into a hole. He then created a thin wall of light in lieu of a ceiling. The giant hailstones fell upon the wall of light, but they weren’t weighty enough to break through.

“That was close... If we had stayed out there, Tahlan, he would have taken you out first.”

While Saiga drew a sigh of relief that he had avoided the worst possible outcome, the situation still showed no signs of improving.

“Still, while there’s plenty that doesn’t make sense, it seems he’s fully committed himself to defeating you... Since he’s using two techniques of this scale at once, I doubt he can tell just who he’s defeated with what while he’s managing them both.”

“...It certainly doesn’t feel like we’re facing a mere mortal.”

At Eckesachs’s observation, Tahlan, who was shivering from the cold, came a hair’s breadth from complaining. The three of them together had managed to corner Fukei to some degree when they were simply engaging in melee combat, but once Fukei had pulled out all the stops, they could do nothing but flee like mice.

The difference in scale between themselves and the enemy was so great that they almost felt embarrassed at believing they had been putting up a good fight. They now understood why Eckesachs had seemed so panicked from the start when they’d found out the identity of the attacker.

“If we had let him pass us, he would have done this near the royal capital, wouldn’t he...?”

The technique manipulated weather on such an enormous scale that it would have had a calamitous impact on the royal capital. The stronger it turned out the enemy was, the less they could afford to run.

“No wonder Tempera Village was destroyed...” Ran lamented to herself, despite still being in her berserker state.

The sheer enormity of what they faced had drawn that remark from her. This wasn’t the sort of enemy that could be fought off with mere martial arts. Even if the storms might theoretically end if the Immortal controlling

them was killed, it was patently absurd to try to fight against a natural disaster on this scale.

“When we fought Tempera Village, the weather was too good to use this sort of attack. That is why, other than using my help, Suiboku fought them with his own strength. Still… There’s something odd here. Even if the weather manipulation is due of Vajra’s powers, manipulating the earth to this extent when he’s never been here before shouldn’t be possible unless it’s an active volcanic area.”

The Immortal Arts were, at their core, techniques that used the power of nature. If there were rain clouds in the sky, it could be used to control the rain to some extent; if there was a volcano nearby, it could be used to intentionally shake the ground. But to control the ground in this area so easily should have been impossible. The land here had been rendered into nothing but an empty wasteland.

“His regeneration earlier as well… Even if he had consumed a Divine Ginseng, there should be limits to how often he can revive himself. Given that his target was Suiboku, he should have been fighting to conserve that power until he faced Suiboku himself… Why did he wait until he suffered a fatal wound to begin controlling the weather?”

Having settled down for the moment, the three of them listened to Eckesachs in silence. While Fukei might not need to use his ki to manipulate the weather because he had Vajra, it should have worn him out to make large chunks of land levitate at a distance. Eckesachs couldn’t understand where Fukei was getting the power to regenerate and move the earth at the same time. Given that those things were possible with the Immortal Arts, but impossible at the scale Fukei was doing them, it didn’t make any sense to her.

“…I don’t really want to raise this possibility, but…maybe he has some ability that lets him regenerate and move the earth at the same time? Maybe using an infinite store of ki?”

Saiga brought up the possibility of a cheat ability that could explain the situation, as though the idea had just struck him. Such a thing was common enough in the stories he’d consumed. The situation would make sense if, like in one of the light novels he used to read, an enemy had abilities that were totally cheating by the normal standards of the world.

“That is fundamentally impossible. Or, at least, Suiboku said it wasn’t possible. But if that’s the case, that might be what he believes will let him beat Suiboku.”

“So he’s spent the last three thousand years training that way? Not improving his physical skills, but in mastering the possibilities offered by the Immortal Arts?”

“No wonder why he seemed so cocky even after we beat the crap out of him! Dammit!”

Tahlan and Ran both seemed to grasp why their enemy had been so certain of victory. They’d had no chance against him to begin with. There

was no way for them to kill him. They should have focused on taking back Vajra, instead.

“Ah, so you’re still alive.”

The tornado vanished and the hail had stopped. Restraining their urge to run, the three climbed out of the hole.

Despite having used techniques of enormous power, Fukei had the easy confidence of a man who still had plenty of energy left in reserve. He showed no sign of being affected by seeing that the three of them were fine and completely unharmed.

“Mm, well endured... You, Eckesachs, was it? So it seems you told them how to escape. I see why Suiboku was your wielder.”

“And you, it seems you weren’t simply blowing hot air when you claimed you were here to kill Suiboku.”

Fukei stepped out from the fading tornado. The three fighters looked pale as they faced off against him. Unlike earlier, they were now in a situation where it was difficult for them to even get close enough to the Immortal to attack, and they knew that they would achieve nothing even if they managed to do so.

“Both technique and terrain are on my side. With the Divine Spear in my hands, there is no way that I can fail.”

The bite in the air took on an even harsher edge. Beneath the storm clouds that blocked out the sun, another cold front was sapping the warmth from the land.

“I will kill him. That’s what I’ve spent three thousand years preparing for.”

It had begun snowing. The snow that fell and piled upon the muddy ground made the footing even worse. Visibility, already low due to the lack of sunlight, was reduced even further by the falling flakes. The terrain was now full of holes large enough for three people to take shelter in. To have to fight in such conditions...

The three of them were well aware of just how hopeless the situation was.

“Allow me to thank you. Have a taste of my Immortal Arts.”

They shouldn’t have underestimated him. They shouldn’t have underestimated the three thousand years he had spent preparing. They shouldn’t have underestimated the endless life that had been spent gearing up to kill a single man.

“And know now that the Immortal Arts are the sole way for humans to move heaven and earth.”

Those who weren’t Immortals weren’t even worthy of being considered an enemy. This was Fukei’s most deeply held belief and it was what accounted for his unwavering confidence, for his certainty that he would defeat the ace of House Batterabbe. No matter what abilities his enemy might have, there was no way that he, an Immortal who controlled heaven and earth, could lose.

“While I may not be able to do the whole country, I can at least clear up this region.”

But, there was another ace present, one who was here to protect Caputo. The ace who was standing upon the deck of the most defensive of the Eight Sacred Treasures, Noah.

Shouzo Okabe, the Scarred Fool, the Ultimate Mage.

Aboard Noah, Shouzo used his power to create an enormous tower of flame. The intense heat from the flames melted the snow, dried the mud, vastly increased the temperature, and had even cleared up the visibility.

“...Impossible!”

The fact that he felt uncomfortably warm from the flames told Fukei that the pillar of fire above him was magical. However, Fukei couldn’t believe that a human could cast magic on this scale. The enormous flame that had been created under the cloud-filled sky made the falling snow evaporate, and had taken over the heavens that Fukei had believed were his.

“So, there are still those who have learned from Suiboku’s teachings...”

It seemed Fukei believed that all of the inequities of the world stemmed from Suiboku.

Irate as even more dared to challenge him, Fukei began to manipulate the earth. The clumps of soil and rock that he had levitated out of the ground earlier began to circle around Fukei like satellites.

“...”

In melee, the time it took Fukei to prepare his next attack would have been an eternity. However, there was no way to interrupt him from where they were now, and more importantly, they had no means of killing an unkillable opponent. Faced with that fact, Saiga was forced to make a decision.

“Everyone, run!” he shouted with a magically enhanced voice toward the people aboard Noah.

Fortunately, it would have been difficult, even with Fukei’s powers, to destroy Noah. But it was doubtful that Fukei would simply let the three of them climb aboard the ship and, even if they did get aboard, that would just motivate Fukei to try to destroy their escape vessel.

“We’ll buy time for you! Hurry up and get out of here!”

The people aboard Noah couldn’t evacuate quickly, even having heard his command. Saiga understood all of this, sweating profusely as he dropped into a stance holding Eckesachs.

“As for the two of you... I’m sorry.”

At Saiga’s apology, Tahlan and Ran snapped back into awareness. They remembered that they were here to fight.

“You have nothing to apologize for. I was worried for a moment what I would do if you told me to run!”

“Yep, what he said! Let’s go kick his ass again!”

No matter how powerful the enemy, they could still fight. As such, they would fight on till the bitter end. Even though they knew that their

excitement was only there to mask their fear of death, their three hearts beat as one.

“Playtime is over,” the Immortal said, dismissing their commitment with a derisive snort.

Fukei seemed almost bored, evidently not interested in engaging in a fight on mortal terms as he launched a barrage of floating islands at the three.

“World Manipulation: Ruination and the Abyss.”

Each chunk of earth, each floating island, was larger than a human being. The three desperately fought their way forward as the giant masses flew at them in a swarm. Even though it was now well lit, the ground was still covered with giant holes. It made it difficult for them to run, and it restricted the routes available for movement.

Still, the three continued to advance upon Fukei while dodging the boulders launched at them.

“Pointless.” Fukei remained motionless even as he watched their desperate charge. “You have nothing to gain.”

Fukei dropped into a crouch and focused. His breathing was calm and he was able to activate his ability without interruption.

A heartbeat, then Flash Step. Fukei suddenly appeared in front of the running Tahlan.

“No!”

Saiga and Ran noticed the sudden movement, but they weren’t going to make it. The three had gotten separated as they advanced while avoiding the rocks assailing them.

“…”

Tahlan had already started to react, but no matter how he moved, it was too late for him to respond effectively. Tahlan was an ordinary man. He had no superhuman speed or durability. Physically, he was the weakest one present. There was nothing he could do under these circumstances.

“If you must curse anyone, curse your master. Curse Suiboku.”

“…”

Tahlan cursed no one and didn’t embarrass himself in the face of death. He accepted the blow that was directed at him with open eyes. He watched the blow that would kill him, a blow that had the anger of three thousand years behind it.

“Alas…”

Side Story — Pillar of Flame

The seat of God was a location that looked like it should have been located high in the heavens, all the way above the clouds. It was a world for God and God alone, only visited by his direct creations, the Eight Sacred Treasures, and for those who God had ‘accidentally’ killed before their time.

God sat upon his throne and was doing his usual work. That work consisted of simply managing this world. That was all he was meant to do. It didn’t matter how many lives were born where, or how many lives were lost where, and it didn’t matter how much suffering or tragedy existed.

All he was there to do was manage the world. He didn’t care in the slightest whether or not anything wonderful happened in the world he oversaw. He simply managed it from his literally divine vantage point. It was, quite literally, just what he did as work. There was no joy, there was no sorrow; it was just labor.

But, something happened that threatened to upend that simplicity.

“...Whoa!”

God’s hand stopped in mid-sentence, leaving his immaculate handwriting unfinished. In shock, God turned his eyes away from his desk, and his eyes caught sight of a giant pillar of fire.

“...I-Impossible...”

A pillar of fire blazed upon the world above the clouds, rising beyond the literal heavens. Ordinarily, this shouldn’t have been possible. But God already knew where that blaze was coming from.

“So, that monster is on the move again...”

Starting twenty-five hundred years ago and ending fifteen hundred years ago... During that long millennium, he had seen that pillar of flame frequently flare up in an incomparable radiance.

“What idiot’s woken up that monster...?”

God had no need to confirm where the fire came from. The only things that burned in this world were the candles that represented human lives. The candle flame that represented a person’s life wasn’t always consistent; instead, it was constantly changing, often flaring up or guttering. Further, there was an enormous gap in the brightness of the flame between individuals.

For those with a great deal of authority, the flames were naturally larger, and were larger still when they were in their prime. For those who would die without accomplishing anything, the flame was weak, and it wouldn’t change during their lifetime.

It was a flame that showed just how brightly, how intensely, that person was living. However, it was impossible for a candle flame to grow into a pillar of this size. It was still a candle flame, after all, and there was no way to tell a difference in intensity unless there were multiple candles around for comparison.

The pillar of flame was so large that it was greater in size than the combined flames of every person living on the planet.

“Damn… Does he intend to destroy this world?”

It was a life that burned bright, but it was also a life whose flame consumed others. The candle that the pillar of flame erupted from belonged to the only man who had ever reached the realm of God on his own.

“Suiboku.”

The world’s most powerful man, a man who could shake the heavens and the earth, and could even shatter the stars. A man who even God feared. Until recently his life — his flame — had settled down, burning as though the man himself was asleep. But now, it was blazing bright once again, with a strength that God himself had never seen before.

“It’s bigger than it once was… Maybe it’s all over.”

God, too, was only a boat floating upon the river of fate. Watching the pillar of flame burn more brightly than ever, God found comfort in being powerless in the face of the inevitable.

Afterword

To everyone who picked up Volume 5 of the *World's Least Interesting Master Swordsman*, thank you very much. It's I, Rokurou Akashi, the author.

Back when I was just a reader, I probably wouldn't have been surprised when a series I liked released its fifth volume. But as an author, this is an incredible milestone for me.

I still remember all the milestones in my writing career like they were yesterday. When the first volume was published. When I heard that I would be getting published. Heck, even the time when I first decided to publish on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*.

At the same time... Embarrassingly, I've ended up a veteran writer with nothing left to write in the afterword.

If I'm honest, it feels like I'm a real professional now, and that does make me happy, but I do think it might be problematic for me to consider myself an experienced old hand when I'm still a rookie in this world.

But since it's the afterword to the fifth volume, I can cut loose a little, right? Which is why I'd like to try my hand at a professional, experienced, veteran writer's version of an afterword.

A manga artist I particularly like often spoke in detail about the chronic ailments that come from being a manga artist. He had lamented that he wasn't alone in those ailments, but that they were shared by many in the industry. Those ailments that he bemoaned were a lack of rest, insomnia, stiff shoulders, and back cramps coming from sitting for prolonged periods.

Now, I'm not a full-time author, but rather a part-timer, so I don't sit in a single position all the time and instead do a fair bit of moving around.

It's supposed to be a good thing, but a part of me thinks, "Huh, that doesn't seem very professional, does it?"

I mean, I've become a published author, so I'd like to have the problems of a professional writer, you know? As I was thinking about such things while doing clean-up and preparations on Volume 5, I noticed something in particular.

I do my work on a laptop computer, but it was getting really hard to click or drag icons.

Since it's a laptop I've been using for a long time, I thought it was just wear and tear on the laptop itself, but it turns out that it was my mouse that was failing on me.

I had been using a wired mouse until now, but I switched to a wireless mouse, and what a difference it's made in my work.

Basically, I had to replace my mouse because it broke from my years of writing work!

My work tools broke because of overuse! That sounds like I'm a professional! It sounds like I'm a veteran writer!

I basked in that feeling for a while. But thinking a bit about it in hindsight, the fact that I was reveling in such a silly feeling made me feel more like a rookie than anything else.

As an author, I suppose I ought to show that I'm a veteran writer in the form of a novel.

No, it must be important for me to maintain the motivations that I had in bringing the best story possible to as many readers as possible, never forgetting what motivated me to be a writer in the first place.

I should be rejoicing not at the fact that I've gotten to volume 5, but at the thought of all the smiles on my readers' faces.

My mother is from Miyako Island in Okinawa Prefecture, and I was also born there. Although I don't speak any of the local dialect because I was raised in Kanagawa Prefecture, I always spent my summer vacations while I was in school at my mother's family home.

But that was back when I was a student.

I went to a trade school, so I was a student until I was twenty, but I remember being really sentimental about the visit during that last year.

Back then, I thought that it was the last time I'd go to Okinawa. That leaving childhood summers behind was what it meant to become an adult.

But now that I'm a writer (even a part-time one) and I have a bit more breathing room in my day to day life, I was able to accompany my mother and return to Miyako Island.

Embarrassingly, or rather maybe idiotically, I had completely forgotten to contact people, so no one in my mother's family knew that I was going to be visiting.

But when I arrived at my mother's family home, everyone was happy to see me.

My grandfather and grandmother were both as healthy as they were when I was a student and welcomed me with open arms.

While I wasn't exactly returning home in triumph, the memory of my warm reception still makes me tear up.

After ten years, my homeland had changed some, but it had stayed the same. It was a very moving experience that made me feel a lot of conflicting emotions.

It was very tiring since I hadn't flown in a long time, but I'm still glad I went.

I know many creators talk about how an artist's experiences create their artwork, so I hope to be able to reflect this experience in my own work. I hope you'll join me when I do.

Now I’ve left it for the end, but... I’d like to thank the following people for everything they did for this volume in spite of everything else they’ve got going on in their lives. Shiso for the beautiful illustrations. Mr. Kuroda of PASH! for being the managing editor both on the light novel and on the comic adaptation, and Mr. Kondo, as well.

I look forward to continuing our work together.

-Rokurou Akashi

Bonus Short Story

Memory

This event occurred a little bit before the berserker Ran returned to her village.

The four martial artists that had accompanied Ran when she left the village spoke to her with solemn expressions on their faces.

“Ran. We’ve talked it over and…We’re thinking of returning to the village.”

“…Why?”

The five of them, Ran and the four other girls, were from Tempera Village, a hidden settlement whose inhabitants were descended from famous mercenaries. Ran, who had been born with an overwhelming amount of power, had sought greater challenges by leaving the village, while the other four had followed her as her hangers-on.

It should be noted that Ran hadn’t forced them to accompany her; rather, the four had decided to follow Ran of their own volition. But that also meant that the four of them had purposefully abandoned their homeland, and even if they returned now, it was doubtful that they’d receive a warm welcome.

“Life out here isn’t bad, is it? I mean…I wasn’t able to do anything against that Immortal, but…”

The first opponent Ran had fought in her search for greater challenges had been Suiboku’s apprentice, Sansui. There was something almost destined about the berserker from Tempera Village being defeated by the apprentice of the man who had decimated the village back when it had been little more than a few sellswords.

Afterwards, the Arcana Kingdom to which Sansui had pledged his loyalty had decided to welcome the five of them in. They weren’t being treated like royalty or even like nobility, but they still understood that they were being treated well. At the very least, they were living much more comfortably than they were when they lived in Tempera Village.

“…Is it because I lost?”

No one would celebrate if the four of them returned to the village. So why had they decided to return in spite of that?

For Ran, the only reason that came to mind was the fact that she had lost so easily to Sansui. Had they lost faith in her after she had so brashly set out to find greater challenges only to get thoroughly humiliated in public? If that was the case, she had no right to stop them. But it would be lonely not having them around.

“No, that’s not it, Ran. But we…we want to be useful to you.”

“Ran, you lost, but you’re still really strong, even by the standards of this kingdom. So everyone expects a lot from you.”

“But that’s not true of us. There’s lots of people who are stronger than we are. That’s…no different from when we were in the village.”

“We need to get stronger.”

Unlike Ran, the other four weren’t particularly powerful. They had simply gotten tired of the closed-off nature of village life, hoped for a more interesting life outside, and hopped on the bandwagon when Ran decided to leave. They weren’t considered strong within the village and they hadn’t grown any stronger outside of it. That was to be expected. They hadn’t done anything to get stronger, after all.

“B-But you’re all treated well here, too, aren’t you?”

“That’s just because they think our bloodlines are valuable.”

“It’s like in the village. The blood inside us…the ability to have children bearing the blood of each style is the only thing people value about us.”

“There’s no value to us as individuals. We’re just third-rate martial artists that can use some basic techniques.”

“Right now, we’re completely useless to you, Ran. To be useful, we have to relearn our martial arts from the basics again. That’s why we’re going back to the village.”

The five assembled here were all part of lineages that bore Rare Arts users. If they had children with people with the same Blood, there was a strong likelihood that the children would also have those abilities. In their cases, those bloodlines had continued for generations.

Up until now, this kingdom had only known about two types of Rare Arts bloodlines. But if all of them were to have children in the kingdom, there would suddenly be five new bloodlines on top of that.

But that would literally just reduce them to the status of breeding stock. Sure, they were more valuable breeding stock than in Tempera Village, but fundamentally, it meant that they were only valued for their ability to bear children, and nothing else.

“Eckesachs kept going on about this point, but we’re still weak. And we can’t even instruct people properly.”

“We can’t help the fact that they’re looking forward to us having children, but we don’t want to just end up as broodmares.”

“At the very least, we’d like to be able to properly teach our martial arts. We don’t need to be the strongest in our styles, or even super first-rate. But we do want to be full-fledged martial artists in our own right.”

“Right now all we’d be doing is weighing you down, Ran. We want to be like Sunae, who tries to stand next to Saiga and fight beside him… Or like Tahlan, who’s trying desperately to catch up to Sansui… We want to become stronger ourselves.”

“Oh, you guys…”

It was better for Ran to stay here. There were people here who could fight her on equal footing and who could even stop her when necessary. If she returned to Tempera Village there would be no one there who could instruct her.

But the four others were different. Even before factoring in that they were from cadet branches or that they were women, they simply didn't have enough training. The only way for the four of them to get stronger would be to return to Tempera Village and receive instruction there.

"So you're committed to this?" Ran asked as a final confirmation.

In a sense, the four girls had betrayed Tempera Village. As such, they faced the possibility of being harassed and ostracized if they returned. They had already been treated poorly as female members of the cadet branches, but that treatment would pale in comparison to what awaited them now.

It was possible that they would be subject to beatings in the name of 'combat training.' Heck, it was even doubtful whether they'd receive any training at all.

The four nodded in silence at Ran's question.

"…I see." Noting their resolve, Ran accepted their answer. For the four to move forward, they needed to return to their roots.

"Alright… Then I'll go with you, as well. I have no intention of brawling…I just want to apologize."

"So, Yabiya, Suji, Kazuno, and Konoko will be returning to the Tempera Village for a while. I intend to accompany them, so I thought I'd let you know."

Ran, with the four girls in tow, had come to discuss the matter with Saiga. Having heard the explanation, the first words out of Saiga's mouth were extraordinarily rude.

"…Um, this might be the first time I've heard your names."

It was so flagrantly disrespectful that the four of them tensed up at once.

"Oh, wait, now that you mention it…"

Although Ran had tried to deny it, she realized he was correct.

"W-Wait! We demonstrated our martial arts in public, didn't we?!"

"Y-Yeah, that's right! Eckesachs picked our technique to shreds, but we did show them!"

"Wait, you're not going to say that you watched our martial arts but didn't listen to our names, are you?!"

"You do know if you didn't know our names, you'd usually ask for them, right?! The fact that you didn't even ask means you didn't have any interest in us, doesn't it?! Doesn't it?!"

The four of them couldn't help but voice their objections. However, no one could deny the truth of Saiga's observation.

The reality of the situation was just plain ruthless. They had thought that they were only viewed as bearers of Rare Art bloodlines, but even with that acknowledgement, they hadn't seriously considered that no one had even thought to learn their names. They had understood that they were considered breeding stock and were resolved to do something about it, but facing this level of disinterest was something they just couldn't let stand.

“We taught you some of our martial arts, didn’t we?! You even learned how to use some of them!”

“Did you seriously consider us to just be useful tools that are here to teach you some martial arts?!”

“Hey! Come on and say something! You’re being rude!”

“Yes, go on and say our names!”

Saiga, unfortunately could do nothing but admit to his fault.

“I’m sorry.”

A sincere apology could sometimes be the most cruel of responses. Saiga had just fully admitted that he had completely neglected to learn anything about the four of them.

“Don’t apologize!” the four of them yelled at him in unison.

“Now, wait… It’s all my fault. Don’t blame Saiga for it,” Ran also apologized to the four.

“I also only treated you as my hangers-on… I only thought of you as my entourage and enjoyed having your company…! Which is why Saiga didn’t think much of you guys. I’m really sorry!” Ran said from the bottom of her heart. This was perhaps the first time in her life that she had been so sincerely apologetic.

“Stop! Don’t apologize! It’s just even more humiliating!”

The four finally broke down in tears. They had been overcome by the knowledge that the nice treatment they thought they’d been getting in the Arcana Kingdom wasn’t even that nice, after all. In fact, given that no one had even remembered their names, their treatment in Arcana was even worse than in Tempera Village.

The four of them suddenly felt a strong urge to return to Tempera Village outside of the reasons they’d given to Ran earlier.

“…Ahem. Anyway, I’m sorry for disrespecting you. Could you please introduce yourselves again?”

Saiga ended up asking for introductions to people who had already taught him the basics of their martial arts, right before he was about to say goodbye to them. He was well aware that he was being extraordinarily rude, which was why he bowed his head deeply when he said it.

“…You want us to introduce ourselves?”

“Yes.”

The four of them exchanged glances, then sighed. It seemed that this was about all that they were worth at the moment. They needed to accept that this was how the world viewed them and aim for improvement from here.

“I guess we need to get stronger.”

“Yeah… We can’t leave things like this.”

“You know, compared to the humiliation of them not remembering our names, I’m pretty sure whatever hazing they’ll do to us in the village will be pretty bearable…”

“We’re going to crawl our way out of this situation… I swear!”

The four of them then introduced themselves again, in a fashion that ensured that Saiga and company wouldn't forget their names a second time.

"Yabiya, Orb Blood, Four Vessels Style!"

Yabiya, who was dressed in a dougi that showed off quite a bit of her arms and legs, struck a stance similar to a karate stance.

"Suji, Seeping Blood, Bursting Venom Style!"

Suji, who was dressed in an outfit that showed just the tips of her hands and feet, and had ribbons tying off her sleeves and cuffs, struck a pose with her palm held out.

"Kazuno, Inebriated Blood, Drunken Fist Style!"

Kazuno was dressed in a thick dougi similar to a judo gi, had her hair tied up in orbs. She dropped into a grappling stance.

"Konoko, Illusion Blood, Mist Shadow Style!"

And finally there was Konoko, who wore a kung-fu outfit with sleeves long enough to hide weapons, a hat upon her head, and something that looked like a paper charm hanging from her forehead. She appeared to waver as she struck her pose.

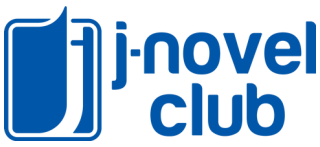
As Saiga tried to memorize their names, the four loudly declared, "There, have you learned our names?!"

"Yes! I've got them now!"

"Don't you dare forget them!"

"No, I won't! No matter what!" Saiga answered firmly, but he had no confidence in that answer whatsoever.

Gotta remember to write all that down later...



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